

SISYPHUS SHRUGGED

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I: THE THEME

TWO-year-old Evelyn held up her arms to her mother, Maureen.

“I need you,” Evelyn said.

“Why do you need me?” Maureen asked, amused.

“Because I need you,” Evelyn said.

“I need you too,” Maureen said, picking up her daughter.

“I never see them,” Andrew Riley said to his wife, Maureen. “Every morning I go to work, my heart breaking. All I do is work from before the dawn to after the dusk.”

“I’m sorry. Here’s a drawing Karen did for you.”

He looked at the self-portrait, its lips looking like sausages, its nose like that of a pig. He smiled.

“I miss my babies,” he said.

“You keep them fed, clothed, and housed, and we thank you for it.”

“Daddy, what’s wrong?”

“Oh, Honey—we thought you were asleep. I’m just sad because I never see you.”

“I’m sad too, Daddy.”

“It’s all right, Honey. I love you. Give me a hug . . . now go back to sleep. Would you like me to read you a story?”

“Yes, Daddy!”

“All right. I’ll be right in. Get into your bed. I’ll be right there.”

Five-year-old Evelyn went to her room.

“Tomorrow I’m going to take them to the lake,” Maureen said. “It’ll do them good to get out of the house.”

“Someday I hope we’ll all be able to go.”

“Me too—but this won’t last forever.”

“I don’t know. Things just keep getting worse.”

Evelyn, Tom, and Boo ran through the woods from the bullies as fast as they could. Big Mike and his nameless friends had bee-bee guns! The girl and her two friends found one of their favorite trees to climb and skeedaddled up it as fast as they could. Sitting up top, they put on brave faces as Mike and his friends found and regarded them from below.

“Well, we caught you, runts,” said Big Mike, grinning. The other two laughed, as if Big Mike had said something profoundly clever. They nauseated eight-year-old Evelyn.

“Ha, ha!” said Tom. “You thought you got us, but we tricked you pretty good!”

Mike raised his bee-bee gun and aimed at Evelyn. She gulped.

“No!” yelled Tom and Boo, whose real name was Ronald. Evelyn didn’t know why everyone called him Boo.

Big Mike shot and hit Evelyn in the arm. “Ow!” she cried out, but she would not let them see her cry, so she held back her tears. Mike’s accomplices then shot Tom and Boo, in the belly and the neck, respectively. The children were hurting and suffering. The older kids, Big Mike and his friends, were laughing.

Just then Boo’s really older brother, Jimmy, found them. He ran to where they were.

“What do you punks think you’re doing?” he said, grabbing the guns out of their hands.

“Hey! That’s my gun!” Mike said.

Jimmy slapped Mike across the face, and Mike blubbered like a baby, then ran home. The other two followed him.

“I already called the police,” Jimmy called up. “They’ll be waiting for them at Mike’s house. Come down. I’m sorry I was so slow.” His face fell when he saw their wounds. Boo had a bee-bee lodged in the skin of his neck.

“You didn’t have to come at all,” Evelyn said.

“Of course I did,” Jimmy said. “The bigger is kind to the smaller, the stronger is kind to the weaker. We take care of each other. That’s what Dad always says.”

“I never see my dad,” Evelyn said. “My mom and sister died in a car accident. I was asleep in the back seat, but I lived.”

The other children, some of whom had heard rumors, stayed silent, too uncomfortable to speak.

Pull yourself up by your bootstraps, Horatio, Eddie Willers said to himself as he got up from the ground in front of the passenger train known as the *Comet*. Holding his forehead grimy with sweat, he re-entered the broken train, collected food and bottles of water from the kitchen car, and set out toward the next town. No matter how far away it was, he would make it, he told himself. *A resourceful, independent man does not simply lie down and die. This train might be broken, but I am not.*

And he kept walking.

“This is John Galt speaking. Mister Thompson’s administration has collapsed, as illogic will always collapse in the face of logic. We, the men and women of the mind, are rebuilding our nation. I am not your leader. I was merely the strike captain. The men and women of the mind are rebuilding our structures: governmental, private, legal, agricultural. Many of you have starved and died. Many more will suffer in the coming days until everything can be restored and made better than it was before, but do not lose heart. Please return to your homes. The Constitution is being restored as we speak. Delegates from each State are being chosen to coordinate new elections, to restore the Congress, which will then approve a new judiciary. We have lost much, but we will gain more than we have ever seen. Richard West has agreed to submit to a national referendum on his assuming the Presidency, and we have approved it. He will provide the kind of *laissez-faire* capitalist leadership that is needed now more urgently than ever. I ask you to approve him as I return to private life. Thank you.”

Richard West won approval. The Senators and Representatives came back to the Congress. The infrastructure was rebuilt by private contractors. President West hailed the return of a free market, in which goods and services would be inexpensive due to competition and pure due to the integrity of those who provide them. Former government services were restored sparingly, erring on the side of the free market, but grain began to grow again, trains began to run again, and even the airline industry began to rebound. Galt became a private scientist, declining repeated invitations to join the State Science Institute as Robert Stadler’s successor. Doctor Floyd Ferris was nowhere to be found, either dead or on the run, afraid of prosecution for the horror of Project X.

“Mister President, the Congress has passed more appropriations for private security firms at our farms; dams; nuclear, electric, and solar power plants; and other vital installations.”

“I’ll sign them,” President West said. “And please tell Attorney-General Anderson that the time has come; I’ve put off a certain faction of my supporters for too long. Just tell him he may proceed with the indictments. He’ll know what I mean.”

“Yes, Mister President.”

“Everything just became clear sailing ahead.”

“Yes, Mister President.”

“And please get me Representative Garmage on the phone.”

“Yes, Mister President.”

“What is violence?”

The professor teaching Randian Philosophy posed this question in the Columbia Petroleum University lecture hall and waited for an answer from his class of over a hundred students.

Someone raised a hand.

“Yes?”

“Hurting someone else?”

“Good. And what constitutes hurting someone else?”

“Well, you could physically harm them.”

“Yes,” the professor said. He thought for a moment. “And how could you do that?”

“You could kill them.”

“Yes. Be more specific. How could you kill them?”

“You could shoot them.”

“Yes. You could engage in direct physical violence. Are there other ways to kill someone?”

He looked about for more hands. Some of the first hands up were faltering. He called on one of them.

“You could withhold something needed, such as food, medicine, or water.”

“Yes. Violence need not be forward action. It can also be the *withholding of something needed*. Good phrase,” the professor said. “If you take away something needed from someone, and he or she suffers, you are engaging in violence. That brings us to John Galt. Who is John Galt?”

The professor waited for hands, then called on one.

“A leader?”

“Yes, I suppose one could call him that.” The professor looked for another hand and found one.

“An economist? I know he had something to do with money.”

“Close, but not quite. It’s been ten years now, so I understand that you were all kids at the time. But John Galt, a follower of the philosophies of Ayn Rand, is a sociopathic anarchist. He fancied himself a leader, and he certainly studied economics, though he drew the wrong conclusions by focusing too narrowly on some things and ignoring others. Ten years ago he tried to ‘stop the motor of the World’. His method was to encourage business leaders to abandon their businesses, on the assumption that they were indispensable. The government and the public would recognize how important they were and stop abusing them, the poor business leaders, as if America was suddenly going to lie down and starve to death refusing to work if a few business leaders disappeared.” The class chuckled.

“Was he successful? No. After some months of confusion and panic, the economy resumed—without those leaders. Of course, we did have an election during the panic.” The professor paused. “So: even though his strike failed overall, is attempted violence still violent?”

Silence and stares.

“Is it still a violent act to attempt violence, even if that violence fails?”

“Yes,” said a student. “Attempted murder is still a crime.”

“Exactly. John Galt attempted to stop the nation’s economy. He failed, but his attempt was an act of violence. I would add that it was also an act of terrorism, because he committed an act of violence to achieve a political purpose. Regardless of semantics, his strike failed. Why? Does anyone know?”

No one raised a hand. The professor scanned the room to make sure no one wanted to try to answer before speaking again.

“Because the business leaders he enlisted for his strike were expendable, and we did eventually recover,” he continued. “However, the temporary disappearance of those business leaders did cause a panic and adversely affected society for a short time.” The professor observed heads nodding in understanding. *This is why I’m a teacher*, he reflected, not for the first time.

“Now, why did Galt do this?” the professor asked.

Some students looked about, afraid to answer, but one young man raised his hand.

“Yes?”

“Because the Government had slid into communism?”

The professor chuckled. “That is a simplification, but it will do. It is true the government had interfered more in the marketplace, under President Thompson, who had the gall to suspend the Constitution and declare himself ‘Head of State’.” Professor Chambers shook his head. “The Equalization of Opportunity Law? The Fair Share Law? Directive Ten-Two-Eighty-Nine? An Economic Dictator?” The professor laughed. “This is America. We believe in freedom. That means regulation, not oppression. Those were un-American concepts and acts that no sane government would attempt or desire. Of course, Thompson was the third in line of succession when the North Koreans . . . August Fifth.” The professor took a moment to compose himself. “The worst national trauma since Kennedy was murdered sixty years prior. You may not be old enough to remember Biden, Emanuel, and Kerry personally, but you have heard what happened, I am sure.”

The names were met with jogged memories and murmurs of “Oh, yeah,” from his students.

“They were great men. They never would have engaged in the kinds of things Thompson did.

“Thompson’s actions, and those of his henchman Mouch, *were* attacks on the free market. The fact is we had too little regulation before, but Thompson overreacted. What he did was essentially Soviet in policy and practice. A heavy government hand on business doesn’t really lead to a thriving marketplace, but one extreme—government tyranny—does not excuse the other, the neglect of deregulation and letting business run roughshod over all else. Thompson’s abuses don’t excuse Galt’s ‘strike’, but they do, however, make Galt’s strike understandable. It’s easy to see the two ends of the spectrum as yin and yang. Who is John Yang?” The professor chuckled then walked to his desk, next to his small podium, and sat on it. “The saddest part for me is that these

attacks on private property distracted America from the real issues of poverty and corporate abuses while handing the abusive corporations—the ones who were the problems in the first place—ammunition in *their* quest to portray the very existence of government itself as the problem. These governmental abuses, as well-intentioned as they might have been, upset many who felt, as Rand did, and rightly so, that the Government was going too far—and created a new set of problems. John Galt was one of those who were upset and wanted to do something about it, and he did. Doing *something* was necessary, but was his strike the right thing to do? Was it effective? In both cases, I think we have to say, ‘No.’ Yes, he slowed down our economy even more, but it was already slow. He just made bad problems worse, causing thousands to die of starvation, lose their homes, and their hope. Worst of all, Galt failed even to acknowledge the *causes* of the policies he opposed. If I had him here, I’d love to ask him: ‘Why did the Government feel it necessary to respond at all, Mister Galt? Its response was draconian and misguided, but to what was it responding? Do you even know why the Economy had stagnated before then, Mister Galt?’” The professor sighed.

“Our society was stagnating because no one cared enough about each other. It was ‘Everyone for oneself.’ The government had been hands-off, but for some reason the companies were doing poorly. No one was buying anything because no one had any money. Everyone was out of work *before* the Government cracked down, and the businesses, for the most part, didn’t give a whit about anything but themselves. Ordinary citizens needed to survive and thrive, but their options were limited. Businesses were shuttered. The majority of jobs that existed paid very little and offered few protections. A few jobs paid enough: these were the jobs offered by the few businesses that understood the value of labor as well as a dollar.

“To address these shortfalls and inequities, the government went too far. The government overreach prompted the Galt Strike, which made matters worse. The Thompson Government collapsed, which was a good thing, but Galt’s strike resulted in a popular backlash against government in general. Galt’s men restored the Constitution, but they rewrote it to do away with all economic controls and entrusted the Country to Galt’s successor Rick West, who at least had the good sense to go back to calling himself president. ‘Win with West,’” the professor chuckled. “Working with Galt and former judge Narragansett, West stripped away most taxes, most business and labor regulations, and most social programs, as you know. I suppose you all spent the past several years before university working rather hard, yes?”

The students nodded.

“Now, children may work. Now, there is no weekend or limit on hours. Now, there is no minimum wage. Now, there are no safety standards or protections. The roof could fall on us at any moment. Exciting, eh?”

“When Galt struck, the majority of the public were living in such poverty they couldn’t even put a roof over their heads or food on their tables because business was not functioning, because the majority of industry leaders were already AWOL.

“What happened was a governmental response against that economic negligence. President Thompson curtailed the rights of business owners. Did he and the Congress go too far? Yes. The Government was willing to try almost anything to change the state of affairs. This was unfortunate but just as understandable as the response. I suppose the best thing I can say of Galt’s strike was that it was similar to the government’s overreaction in the respect that it was wrong but somewhat understandable. He felt frustration over the tyrannical controls. His response was both wrong and ineffective, beyond a few months’ panic. Of course, that panic was enough to give certain politicians an opening to persuade the public that not only was the Government wrong but that Galt’s views were the only right ones. And we all know how things go when one claims to have all the answers.” Some students nodded.

“Nobody has all the answers,” the professor said. “My wife likes to remind me of that whenever I think I do.”

The class chuckled.

“But the real question is why the economy was slow before Thompson cracked down, and the answer is business incompetence. Why are you in business if you don’t have a good product or service? Why don’t you give a crap about your customers, or, if that’s not good enough, where is your self-respect to do a good job? In other words, it is human nature that is the problem.” The professor paused and sighed.

“What’s more important—skill or compassion?” he asked. The class thought about it. “Take your time. Be prepared to explain your answer.”

A student raised her hand.

“Yes.”

“Skill, because what good is compassion if you can’t execute it?”

“Okay,” the professor said, nodding. “Anyone else?”

“Compassion,” another student said.

“Why?” the professor asked.

“Because if you lack skill you can gain it. If you lack compassion you probably won’t try to gain it. Think of a nurse: do you want a nurse with compassion, who at least cares to try to improve herself, or a cold robot who knows exactly how to insert that cold catheter no matter how you feel about it?”

The class laughed.

“Good example,” the professor said. “Yes, I would say that compassion, rather morality, is paramount. Because you can be the best at what you do, but if you lack morality you’re a monster. Whereas if you actually give a crap you will work until you can do it, and you will do it for the right reasons.”

“John Galt is a hero!” said one student. “You can say what you want about him, but he single-handedly brought down the Thompson regime.”

“Well, there are certainly those who think so, “ Professor Chambers said. “I am not one of them. Yes, he brought down a government that I feel was doomed to collapse of its own inefficiency regardless. He hastened its demise, yes. But did he do it single-handedly? No. He had a lot of help, like Robin Hood. His band of merry men were the strikers of the mind, and they worked as a team to achieve a common goal. That’s what liberals recommend. The problem is his policy—*laissez-faire capitalism*—led to the destruction of the honest businesspeople Galt wished to support. Rick West and the rest were *not* honest, and in a market with no rules or standards of behavior, the ruthless and unscrupulous businesspeople do away with the honest ones—by hook or by crook. They behave as badly, if not worse than, the Thompson Government. Then working people at the bottom suffer, and they call it the genius of capitalism. Galt’s ‘hands off’ approach guaranteed his own destruction. He was as naïve as Marx, just in the opposite direction. They both trusted in the morality of human beings left completely unfettered, unsupervised, left to their own devices, not to abuse their power. That’s just crazy.” The professor shifted position, then nodded to the student who praised Galt.

“Galt was a brilliant physicist. Galt had skill. But Galt thought, and probably thinks still, that holding the whole World hostage through terrorism is not only acceptable but admirable. We can disapprove a system or a prevailing attitude without engaging in violence, though I admit that sometimes engaging in a strike is one’s only recourse—when one’s livelihood or rights are being threatened. In Galt’s case, nothing of his or of his fellow strikers was being threatened. He scared our nation into a slowdown for no reason other than to flatter his own ego, which, by all reports, was already pretty inflated.” The class laughed. “But what he did to our nation and world was both unnecessary and unacceptable. Imagine the suffering his ‘strike’ inflicted on the most vulnerable members of our society—those who were laid off by companies when the public panicked for no reason and stopped buying things for months—and tell me you admire it. Tell me you think that was a good idea. Tell me you think well of someone who does that to the elderly, the infirm and disabled, the children, the laid off. I’m sure there were times when each of you struggled economically. Do you want someone pulling the rug out from under you to score a political point?”

No one said anything. The majority of the students in the room remembered their parents struggling in the wake of the Galt strike. They tried to imagine a world in which society helped its most vulnerable members with a hand up not a push out the door.

“No, I’m sure you don’t. Now, though, they do so as a matter of course. Taking away basic protections such as the minimum wage just created a new underclass of poverty-stricken workers who could never hope to rise above their station. It was a recipe for unrest, which we have seen occurring recently.

“One hundred years of standards were swept away practically overnight, and we have all been living the result.

“Because most families could not survive on two incomes, most two-parent families came to need three, four, or more incomes to survive. Children now go to work as soon as they can: twelve, ten, younger. Very few finish secondary school anymore, and the current generation of college students—that’s you—is expected to be the last. The private companies that run the universities are expected in the next year or so to transform them into work-training centers focusing only on specific jobs. The private companies that run the formerly-public primary and secondary schools are expected to cease preparing children for college in favor of entering the work force immediately.”

The professor raised his arms, indicating the hall around them all.

“Classes will, starting *this fall*, no longer be in history, language arts, mathematics, or science; they will be in how to operate assembly-line machinery, how to prepare food and clean houses, and how to persuade passersby to part with a dollar. Does that sound good to you? Recommended levels of insulation, invasive plant inventories, that kind of thing.”

Some students gasped.

“Yes, it is shocking,” the professor said. “They promised to put America back to work, and they did.” He shook his head.

“What will you do, Professor Chambers?” someone asked.

The professor looked down and smiled. He thought before answering. “Well, hope springs eternal. I like to think that our new leadership will restore some balance. Teachers are necessary, as much as we might hate them. I’m not sure why we hate them, but we do.” He chuckled. The professor looked back up at his notes on the board. “Hopefully you don’t hate me.

“So the Government was foolish, yes. It was inept and overreaching. You can’t go so far so fast, even when you’re right, and they *were* wrong. But Galt’s strike practically discredited the idea of government, and it led us to our current state of affairs. Now we have practically no government at all, and at this moment I’m supposed to remind you to fuel all your vehicles with Columbia Petroleum. It cleans your engine while providing you with the best mileage of any fuel on the road, not that I suppose any of you has a car.”

A few students shook their heads no. The rest stared off, pondering all the professor had said.

“Professor, what were the programs like?” one student asked at length.

“You mean social programs?”

The student nodded.

“Well, in the old days, for example, we used to have programs to help old and poor people survive. Now, of course, the only free medicine for the elderly is the Grayson Pill. You take that and, as they say, ‘Die Soon.’ Suicide has become our social program, and now, almost no one lives past seventy. You work until you can’t work anymore, then you check out. It’s funny, because the Right used to oppose assisted suicide, but now it’s their favorite cost-cutting measure. And if you’re poor, well, get a job, right? ‘If you’ve got a job, suck it up and tough it out. Quit whining.

Don't bother us with your petty 'needs', and God forbid you become dependent on a handout, whether you need it or not."

The students chuckled uncomfortably.

"Questions." The professor took a sip from a bottle of water. A young woman raised her hand, and he nodded at her.

"What happened to Galt and his men?"

"Don't you know?" Professor Chambers was amazed. "I suppose you wouldn't, what with the lies they've told." He rubbed his chin. "West liked his power a little too much, so when those who still hated Galt within the nation's law agencies went after him, West allowed it. The rest of Galt's strikers were powerless against the new chief executive. We can only speculate on the rationalizations of an anti-government president who abuses his power. Probably 'the greater good' comes into play. Of course, 'the greater good' usually means 'my personal expediency'. It was a classic betrayal, but that's what happens without regulation. Galt, Narragansett, and the rest actually had the presumption to believe the Founders they professed to admire didn't know what they were doing when they regulated trade. Well, the Founders knew that a free society required regulation. The stronger protects the weaker—that's Basic Morality 101. When the stronger *preys on* the weaker, it's the job of other strong ones—ones who possess morality—to intervene and protect. Galt didn't know or forgot this, and we've all been living the results of Galt's error. Even Galt has to have realized his mistake by now, but who knows? He's probably still waiting for 'men of the mind' to liberate him again. At least we have our constitution back, or what they left of it, and at least West's successor, Lang, has honored its provisions regarding elections. There was some doubt he would, for a while."

"Professor Chambers?" another student asked.

"Yes."

"I know that Nietzsche advocated following one's own path. Is Rand just like Nietzsche?" she asked. "Should we just do whatever we want?"

"Oh, well, that's a slightly different topic, but no matter. Are there any questions on the last points?" he asked, putting down his bottle of water. There were none. "All right. Nietzsche and Rand have some big similarities, it's true. Nietzsche advocated the 'divine selfishness' of the 'higher man', whereas Rand advocated what she called 'the philosophy of reason', which she too defined as following one's own purpose. They both said that selfishness should, would, and did lead to the improvement of society. These are similar if not identical positions.

"They both famously, and courageously, utterly condemned organized religions as shams designed to enslave the weak-minded. I hope none of you here today is weak-minded," the professor chuckled.

"Where they differ is in where they said one's selfishness, will to power, or purpose should be directed. They both said it was up to the solo person to decide his or her own virtues. But only Rand placed moral value on the accumulation of wealth. Nietzsche seems content to advocate

dancing on mountaintops and enjoying the view, while Rand would buy the mountain and charge for access to see it.” The class laughed.

“Another big difference is that Nietzsche was a logical thinker who developed his arguments carefully, even beautifully. One never lacked for clarity or a foundation of his thinking. However, one of our greatest critics of Rand has said . . .” Professor Chambers picked up a book and opened it to a marked passage, which he then read aloud: “‘Rand’s writings actually offer precious little in the way of genuine argumentation. Typically, she simply announces a position as allegedly following from such-and-such premises. Yet a step-by-step pattern of reasoning by which one may validly pass from premises to conclusion is rarely even intimated. Thus, while Rand’s corpus abounds in declarations that this, that, or the other is necessitated by the Law of Identity, just how this happens to be so isn’t plausibly spelled out in detail. Instead of ratiocination she delivers sermons on the omnipotence of rationality.’

“Hmm, that’s a word we’d all have to look up, ‘ratiocination’, eh? I took the liberty: it means ‘the process of reasoning’, or ‘thinking and arguing logically and methodically’. So Rand talks about the importance of reasoning logically without doing so for her readers. But we knew that already, didn’t we?” The professor looked around at his students, then continued reading aloud.

“‘Rand would have us believe, in fact, that her entire philosophy follows logically from the Law of Identity (A is A). That her philosophy does so follow is thunderously false.’ One cannot state absolutes uncritically and expect one’s readers to swallow them whole. Well, Rand can.”

In one of the back rows, a young woman took notes intently.

The professor picked up a notebook. “Another critic, Mark Pumphrey, dismissed Rand as ‘recommended only as documentation of an anomaly in the history of ideas’.” The professor chuckled, put down the notebook, and looked up at the class. “Harsh criticism. I do not think she is an anomaly, sadly.” He found that almost all students were following his words closely, which pleased him, and encouraged him to make the following point:

“You’ve also got to remember that when Rand was writing, we had high taxes on the wealthy, regulation, and social programs. The Economy was booming. For Rand’s views even to have slight relevance, she had to write as if times were terrible. The reality in which she lived contradicted her. You would think a step outside or a glimpse at the newspapers would have been enough to save her eleven years of work, but that is what ideology does for us: it blinds us to contrary evidence.

“Along these lines—and I know I’m going to run long if I don’t stop, but I really think this is relevant and bears sharing with you—I received a letter the other day from one Jaroslav Melgr, who had some insightful things to say.” The professor searched through his papers. “Ah, here it is.” The professor read the letter excerpt aloud:

I grew up in communist Czechoslovakia and have lived in the U. S. for over twenty years now. It's amazing that Rand, after living in the U. S. for more than thirty years (at the time of publishing her most famous works), still doesn't seem to grasp the vast differences between Soviet and American societies. The public she's describing . . . are hardly the entrepreneurial, free-thinking, and gun-wielding American people we know. Instead they are obedient, subservient, never-questioning and always-obliging *muzhiks* of the Tzarist and early Soviet Russia. There is certainly a great deal of apathy in today's society, but not the fear of questioning. There is abuse of powers no doubt, but it's perpetrated by the "capitalists" who work hand in hand with politicians on cover ups, bailouts, and other schemes. It's Rand's greed at its best. What is it that you're in a denial of?

The professor looked at the class and made a facial expression of, "That about sums it up." Then he said, "All right, I think that's a good place to stop for the night. Next time we'll look at examples of her logical failures in *The Virtue of Selfishness*. And remember: your takeaway from tonight is the Government was wrong, but Galt's strike was *an equally wrong overreaction in the opposite direction*. Or, 'Two Wrongs Don't Make a Right'. Hmm. That might be a good paper topic. Papers due Monday. Good night," the professor said.

Most students packed up and left, some staying to talk with Professor Chambers, others milling about, waiting for friends. The young woman in question left quickly.

Outside the lecture hall, a young man from the class came up behind her. "Excuse me?" he asked. The dark-haired young woman turned about suspiciously.

"Yes?"

When he saw how beautiful she was, even through her clear plastic breathing mask, he was stunned momentarily.

"I was in the Rand class," he managed to say. "I was wondering why you were taking such detailed notes. Nobody cares that much. Everyone knows he's an easy grader."

"I do," she said.

"Why? He's an idiot who shouldn't be allowed in the same room with students. Rand was a genius, and he's preaching socialism in a school owned by a business!"

"There's no point in going to class if you only hear what you want to hear," the young woman said. "Be provocative or sit down and put down your pen. Professor Chambers did his job well, since he provoked you. Obviously Columbia Petroleum knows this and supports him. If I were you I'd pay attention and learn something. As for why I care about getting what he said right, it just so happens that I'm a journalist writing a story."

"Oh? What about?"

"Read the *Times* and find out."

"The *Times* is a filthy liberal rag."

“Well, then, I guess you have no real interest in what I’m writing. Good night.”

The young man merely glared at her as she walked away. The young woman thought about her work and walked back to the #1 station at 116th and Broadway warily and quickly. Fortunately, it was still dinner time. As long as she got home quickly, she would be safe.

Right before the station, she came upon a drug store. She hated to pass drug stores. “Hey, Miss!” Evelyn heard a young man say. Since deregulation, everything was legal. “We’ve got it all here: heroin, cocaine, ecstasy, meth, LSD, you name it! What kind of trip would you like to take?” the young man asked as she passed.

“The one I’m taking,” Evelyn said. “Sorry.”

“Cool!” the young man said. “What kind is that?”

“The kind that doesn’t require external help.”

“Oh. Wow,” the young man said, evidently puzzled.

Evelyn Riley paid for the subway ride and declined the mechanized offer to buy an umbrella. She walked to the nearest subway car and got in, placing her purse and work bag on her lap. She no longer even noticed her birthday gift, the form-fitting vest her aunt gave her the year before. She rode the train home to Battery Park City feeling tired but amused by what she had learned.

The capitalists are the moral ones, and of course those at the top of any organization are naturally the ones with the most talent and creativity, Evelyn thought to herself. *Okay, Rand—that’s just silly.* The problem was that even after their discrediting, even after the majority of the Country had experienced the failed morality of those at the top, many foolishly still believed those ideas. She remembered G. A. Cohen’s statement that every market is a means of predation. *The problem is we don’t wish to acknowledge our system is designed for predation. Especially the predators. Well, of course not. They’d rather portray it as a virtue, so they can continue tricking their prey. Anything but tell the truth.*

But this sounded more like *The Communist Manifesto* than a good story. She still needed a story to give her editor, Jo.

Evelyn got off the subway at 68th and York and walked back to her apartment through blocks that in the past ten years had gone from shuttered to shining. Every store front was open and doing business, it was true, but the country was, in Evelyn’s opinion, worse off than it had been before. It no longer looked the way it had looked when it had been abandoned by those who claimed to be its true leaders, but now its gloss hid a more sinister reality.

What had happened in the past to individual industries, such as in the case of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, now occurred across the board. Monopolies in most industries battling for control by region. Whereas in the past one business, entity, or person could only own a certain number of franchises or avenues of opportunity, in the West and Lang years all control had ended. Cutthroat competition without real rules had returned. It was survival of the fittest, and not everyone survived. The end result was that most workers in an industry worked for the same business. The ways of doing things stagnated. The customer had no choice, or one choice,

depending on one's point of view. As choices decreased, prices increased, but this only heightened the previous wealth inequality: those who could afford the monopoly's prices paid them, and those who could not bought the lesser, black-market version. As a result, most Americans bought and used the cheapest goods and services imaginable, everything was as temporary as could be and disposable, and no one knew anymore what quality looked like—or had only heard rumors of what had gone before. The rich, of course, continued to demand and enjoy quality.

The monopolies were well aware of the lesser versions and their popularity. No matter what it could not eliminate the competition entirely, and the black market forced the monopoly, in each region and in each industry, to lower its prices to stay competitive with the alternate. Competition could not be killed entirely. The monopoly prices were higher, but the quality was too, and there were enough rich and semi-rich “real people” earning enough “real money” to support the monopoly without forcing real change, because they didn't want to force change so much as purchase what everyone understood to be “the best”. They had appearances to maintain, and they liked waving their money about.

For the majority of shoppers, on every corner were “cheap and cheerful” shops offering every possible product or service, shops painted and decorated with garish colors and designs to attract attention. Neon and fluorescent bulbs created a permanent day-night. Employees stood outside to hawk wares or services, inviting pedestrians to come inside and spend “just a buck or two”. But money was scarce for most, so every penny counted. Smart savers did not weaken for a moment, but there were many who were not smart. They continued to work for next to nothing with no rights or health care at multiple jobs just to continue to run in place in the Hamster Wheel of Life. Every imaginable product or service was advertised in every imaginable place.

The biggest problem was that when every social program was cancelled, millions were left without shelter, heat, food. Those who could work took the new jobs, oftentimes pooling resources (living space, child care, expenses) with other families. Those who could not take work due to age, disability, or other hindrances turned to crime. Many of those working augmented their meager pay with burglary and mugging. Evelyn expected violence with every step.

Evelyn turned a bright, loud, distracting corner, her eyes focused on her destination, her broken headphones in her ears just to deceive anyone who might try to talk with her. Her favorite musician was a singer-songwriter from Ireland renowned for her honesty, the good and the bad, the balanced and the unbalanced. Sinéad O'Connor's voice was cold, crisp, clear, tremblingly vulnerable yet self-righteous, angry and anguished. Her music ranged from cold to warm. Ms. O'Connor's lyrics contained cries of outrage and despair, wishes of hope and love, in the midst of injustice. Evelyn tended to love things that were high, sharp, and even cold. Evelyn also loved Ms. O'Connor for expressing those things that no one else dared express in a land of dysfunctional government and religion. Ireland was known for its alcoholism, child abuse, and piety. Sinéad O'Connor's name was synonymous with the exposure of hypocrisy and abuse; she

was a living embodiment of the best of Ireland . . . and what had been done to that best. In her lyrics, her interviews, her website postings, and even her costumes, Sinéad exposed her own flaws and frailties as if to say, “I am no better than you, and there is nothing wrong with you for being human. I am human too. Do you see what has been done to me? They who did this to me, and they who did such things to you, are the inhuman ones. Let us celebrate our humanity, and our not sinking to their level, together, my friends.” Sinéad represented Evelyn’s aesthetic and ethos in one musician. *I really need to replace these earphones, Evelyn thought, so I can listen to her again.*

In the space between two buildings, Evelyn momentarily glimpsed an empty metal frame situated prominently atop another, smaller building, just high enough to be visible to most of the city. It had used to hold a calendar, taken down when citizens decided they considered being informed being controlled, which struck Evelyn as a rather odd interpretation. She could use reminders of the date from her office window, instead of the sight of an empty space. Evelyn glanced at it and went back to ignoring the cries of barkers outside stores.

Day or night, stores sent text messages to all phones within range. Walk by a store, get a message saying, “For ten minutes only! Come into our store now and get a special deal! Mention this text message and get an additional discount off our already low, low, prices!” Fortunately, phones soon came with the feature of being able to filter out such messages. Evelyn had filtered them out long before, but she knew that whenever she wanted she could take advantage of such extra discounts.

“SEX! GET FUCKED WHILE YOU WAIT! WE SUCK, FUCK, AND LICK FOR LESS!” screamed a flashing neon sign in front of a mini-brothel Evelyn passed. Outside stood a professionally dressed man and woman. They saw her, and the man said, “Whatever your pleasure, we can provide it.”

When Evelyn did not respond, the woman said, “If you like girls, I’m all yours.”

Evelyn shook her head no and kept walking. She had become used to this kind of proposition years before. The brothel’s text message, promising a very good time and a free tenth session, went straight to her phone’s trash file.

The calendar caused Evelyn to think about how long ago her childhood and adolescence seemed. She was then twenty-six and just beginning to feel herself an adult. She remembered hearing how, before she was born, her father had told her a president had been found lying to the public about some shady dealings he had been conducting—trading arms for hostages, after saying he wouldn’t deal with terrorists—to fund some terrorists, in violation of a specific law passed to forbid his doing so. As someone who had been taught in school that the American ideals of government were inspirations to the World, she had been revolted hearing of this man’s behavior. She felt it would not have been able to go on if the media had been more critical, had held his feet to the fire, instead of simply accepting his evasion that, “I just don’t recall.” It was when she learned of this from her father, a lawyer who handled a high number of public-defense

cases, that her interest in journalism had been solidified. She would be the watchdog, and she knew that she would never lie to the public, no matter where the truth led her.

Evelyn studied famous reporters such as Woodward and Bernstein and dreamed of breaking a big story as they had, but she had instead come to write reviews and puff pieces for the Sunday *World Times* magazine, which was a good gig if you could get it, she admitted to herself. Still, she longed for more.

Evelyn was essentially an only child, and she had craved the companionship of a peer more than anything else. Her parents were not peers, and her parents worked most of the time. Her single father did what he could, after she was five, after the loss that would overshadow all others in her life, the loss that would inform her every moment, the loss that was her reality. When she came home from school she wanted the companionship of her peers to continue. Friends occasionally visited and vice versa, but it was never enough, because they went home. Imaginary friends were not enough. She learned to read and write, devouring books and writing her own stories. Books opened up the World to her imagination. She could go anyplace, do anything, and even imagine anyone was her friend, from Captain Kidd to Malcolm X. Writing allowed her to impose her vision onto paper, to share her thoughts and dreams with . . . whom?

What excited her were the tools of the trade: the pen, mightier than the sword; paper; and pixels. Also napkins and envelopes. Writing could occur anyplace, on anything, even skin. The Muse could not be forced. If she visited at three in the morning and only toilet tissue was at hand, toilet tissue would do. What mattered were the words, the words! The words that would set herself and others free from the tyranny of the physical, the mundane, the situation. Evelyn saw herself as a liberatrix.

Even more important to Evelyn than words were the ideas they expressed, and even more important to Evelyn than ideas generally was the pursuit of Justice and the use of words to that end. Justice required the most careful and judicious use of language, Evelyn felt, because the slightest mis-statement or intentional prevarication could and would change the meaning of an utterance to the detriment of the truth and justice. A lie was still a lie, and her father taught her about the subtle ways in which liars twisted words. She vowed, as a teen, to fight for justice with words as her tools, as that was where her talent lay. With words she could do the most good.

Writing is the most powerful thing there is, Evelyn thought. *Who do we remember from thousands of years ago? The writers. And some people who didn't write, but we know about them thanks to the writers. The writers are the ones who decide who is worth remembering, and what will be remembered. The writers, and what they write about, live forever.*

Evelyn wanted to be immortal, to live that way, to touch minds and hearts long after she was gone, via her words. From her mind to the page to someone else's mind. The tool was the most fragile, but it was also the most powerful: a single thought, the power of an idea. The pen was mightier than the sword. She just had to find an idea worth sharing.

Evelyn knew that not everyone felt these ways, which made it all the more important that she tell the truth when she wrote. But even a desire to tell the truth was not enough, as history was written by the victors. She would have to find an idea, tell the truth, and win at whatever she wrote. That would be the hard part.

None of her friends was a writer. None of her friends understood until she attended university, which was filled with writers. Few of them understood, Evelyn felt—they dabbled, they played at words, to flatter themselves or others. They were not serious. They told her she was too serious. These “peers” were inconsequential to Evelyn. They lacked vision, morality, the desire to change the World for the better, the real ability to do so.

Evelyn’s first job was at a restaurant where the manager was such a fire-breathing jerk that Evelyn quit after four days. Not only did she feel she deserved to be treated with respect, she did not wish to contribute her talents to any enterprise that treated its workers badly. A business would and should not long survive mistreating its employees, she felt strongly. Even if the business persisted for years as workers came and went, the business would never achieve its full potential by harming its help. Imagine how much better workers would work if motivated by fair treatment! The days of whips and chains were past; a shared vision with shared rewards was the order of the day, but some had not yet noticed. Evelyn immediately went to work at a different restaurant, scooping iced cream and preparing desserts, where the management was more enlightened though the pay was the same. And fair treatment, not money, made all the difference. She could support an enterprise with wise, just, and moral leadership, and she worked there as hard as she could until her university term started that fall, the fall of 2019. There were many *Blade Runner* references that year, Evelyn recalled, though she did not live in Los Angeles and no one, to her knowledge, owned android pets. Her own pet would have been offended by the suggestion.

When Evelyn was a girl, she remembered good times under President Obama. The country was recovering from the Bush disaster, doing better all the time, slowly but surely, despite Republican obstruction. Obama served two terms and Biden began one, but after the tragic events of 2017 led to the Thompson regime, John Galt’s strike created the fear and panic necessary for a Republican takeover. Rick West, elected in 2020, reversed everything: health care, the work week, the minimum wage, even safety standards and regulations. “Win with West!” and “Go West!” she remembered were slogans of his. Evelyn had been seventeen that first fall at university when everything started to fall apart, but she remembered the good that government could do, and she suspected that others of her age did too. Now everything was a scramble. She was just fortunate she could pay her rent with her reporter’s job, because the *Times* still possessed its conscience and paid its staff living wages.

President West had said half the Country “are dependent upon government, believe that they are victims, believe that government has a responsibility to care for them, believe that they are *entitled* to health care, to food, to housing, to you name it. They think that’s an entitlement and government should give it to them. . . . And so, my job is not to worry about those people. I’ll never convince them they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives. All I can do is rid us of the scourges known as dependency-producing social programs and the minimum wage. That’s why I am announcing legislation to end the minimum wage, so Americans can start *earning* their money again. In this way they will finally learn the value of a dollar. We are not an entitlement society.”

When those on public assistance (food stamps, Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security) were dropped from the “public teat”, as West and his supporters called it—as if there were something wrong with a mother nursing her children, in this case Mother Earth and her agents —, millions suddenly found themselves without enough to live on. The military was not privatized, though it might as well have been. The police, the fire departments, the hospitals, the schools, the mail system were. Taxes funded the police and fire departments still, but if you couldn’t pay your doctor in advance, you died. Evelyn wondered why, except for police officers or firefighters saving one’s life, health care was not considered as important as property care. Your home being burgled or burned? No problem. You being beaten in the burglary or burned in the fire? You’re out of luck.

Riots ensued in several places across America, vandalism of employers. The rich retreated behind gates as the great unwashed were forced to accept multiple low-wage jobs or turning to crime just to survive—there was no other choice. There was also no child care or health care. America became a giant strip mall, the local shops killed by the big-box stores, and a shooting gallery. More guns, advocated by politicians obsessed with firearms, meant more violence. Shootings were so common that Evelyn’s aunt, Meighan, had felt compelled to buy Evelyn a light-as-air bulletproof vest, strong enough to stop bullets but flexible enough not to impede her movements.

“Thanks, Aunt Meighan,” Evelyn had said.

“Just in case,” her aunt had said.

When all campaign-finance laws were repealed, the corporations were able to buy Senators and Representatives at will again. They even owned a president. American society was at its breaking point, with clashes between police and protestors increasing, when Vermont Governor Laurence Sterling ran for office in 2028, promising to restore good jobs and public services. Despite the most money ever spent against a candidate, he won narrowly, but there was a long way to go to overcome the problems he inherited, the problems that continued, the problems that walked about in the Congress claiming to represent the People. These were the currents in which Evelyn Riley became an adult, and President-Elect Sterling had yet to be sworn in..

Of course, whenever there was rioting over economic matters, there were those who chose scapegoating racial and ethnic minorities over focusing on the real problems and their causes. In recent weeks the latest flare up of unrest seemed to have died down as a result of the election victory of Sterling, Evelyn felt. In their hearts, the majority of the People knew who cared about them, and who was responsible for the problems, she felt. But only the Shadow knew what lurked in the hearts of men and women.

Evelyn, whose heels clicked on the pavement despite the noises of the late-closing shops, was not yet twenty-seven.

In President-Elect Sterling's campaign, he had pushed for a return to the minimum wage to stop the poverty, the misery, the unrest. Evelyn was amazed he had won the election, though narrowly; evidently enough Americans remembered what it had been like to receive a guaranteed minimum wage and did not believe the lie it was a "job-killer". *The only jobs the minimum wage kills are jobs that should pay more*, Evelyn thought bitterly. *Pay more and someone will do them. God forbid.*

"We still have a long way to go," Governor Sterling of Vermont had said during the campaign. "Almost all our citizens are working, but they are working at jobs that pay less than what our minimum wage used to be. Some jobs pay more than others, but 'the genius of capitalism' has left too many of our citizens living hand to mouth. Almost no one has savings in the bank. This is devastating America. When I take office I will propose a return to an America of fairness, an America of an honest day's pay for an honest day's work. The Fair Pay Bill, which I plan to introduce as soon as I take office will restore our Federal minimum wage, allowing States to exceed it if they wish, of course, but everyone will be able to feed their families without working two or three jobs and insane hours just to tread water. It's time to start moving ahead again." Evelyn supported this bill, but the Republicans and conservative Democrats in the Congress were already grouching about it.

Most Americans worked at non-criminal jobs, but they were working far too much for far too little. Most were nearing their breaking points. Some had already reached them. The only companies still paying their employees living wages were the Ford Motor Company, General Motors, Apple Computers, and the *World Times*. Evelyn knew she was very fortunate, even for her modest job.

Everywhere was hustle and bustle, at all hours of the day and night, because most Americans had to work two jobs to survive, some three. Everything was busy: every shop, every sidewalk, every street. Everyone was busy; no one was ever home. Sometimes Evelyn thought the only ones doing well had to be the burglars.

Every block was festooned with signs, banners, flags, and balloons promoting goods and services at bargain rates. The City looked like a circus, with its lights and colors. Everything was disposable, so businesses could make the most money. Quality did not exist anymore.

"Pizza! Three dollars for a large pie!" hawked a young man holding a sign on the street near to Evelyn's apartment building. *Three dollars*, Evelyn thought. *When I was a girl, three dollars*

couldn't even buy two slices of pizza. Of course, back then pizza tasted good. Everyone was desperate, working for pennies, except of course for the large number of criminals. Supply and demand meant that everything was dirt cheap because nobody had money to spend. All the money had trickled its way up.

Evelyn took a circuitous route, circled her apartment, and approached it from the opposite direction at last.

When Evelyn turned the corner of her street, she saw two men on the sidewalk down the block, walking on the other side, with the leisure of boredom and potential malice. She had seen their type before. Despite her precautions, she could not turn back. She made an effort not to quicken her steps, not to betray fear.

As she approached her landing, the two men crossed the street to confront and block her. She stopped and stood her ground. It was not as if this was the first time this had happened to her.

“Hey, pretty,” one of them said to her. “You look lonely.”

“Get out of my way.”

“Aw, that’s not very friendly. Was that very friendly?” he asked his companion, who shook his head no.

“You’ve got some nice clothes,” the first man said of her plastic suit jacket and skirt. “Let’s see if what you’ve got under them is nice too.”

“I said get out of my way,” Evelyn repeated calmly.

“Or what, honey?” the man said again, stepping closer to her. She stepped backward.

“Aww,” the first man said, then lunged for Evelyn. She responded by blocking him with her left hand, grabbing his arm with both her left and her right, and tossing him onto his back on the side walk. She looked at the second man with warm confidence. He wavered, then ran.

“Hey!” yelled the first man. “Get back here!”

“Leave now or I will turn you in,” Evelyn said to him.

“All right, all right,” the man said. Evelyn watched him walk away, rubbing his back and hips, limping stiffly. *That was almost too easy*, Evelyn thought. *Go home and jerk off.* After she was sure the two men were both gone, she went to her own doorstep. The neon and fluorescent lights, on residential buildings new and old, lit New York City at night almost as brightly as did the Sun during the daytime. Even so, Evelyn remembered Kitty Genovese every time she came home and put her door key in its lock. She shuddered to think of meeting those two clowns without at least the protection of visibility.

On a small screen above the lock, an animated bee appeared, speaking in a French accent. “Are your zinusez clogged? Does it hurt to breaz, even to sink? Try Nasalex. You will feel much bettair as fast as a bee!” She waited for the absurd pitch to end and went inside her apartment building.

After locking the exterior door, she went up the stairs to the apartment she shared with Lucie Marotte, a young barista at two different coffee shops. Evelyn let herself into the apartment (ignoring the home security advertisement over her doorknob), closed the door, and locked that door too against possible predators. Even though the unemployment rate was about five percent, there were still many people out there desperate enough to attack someone for the smallest amount of money, item, or advantage. After sliding the chain across the door and turning the bolt, Evelyn exhaled and turned toward her hallway.

Evelyn had grown into adulthood in a sea of advertisements and sales pitches. Her last year of high school had been spent in the shadow cast by John Galt and his strike. When she was eighteen, her first year of university saw the election of Rick West and a pallor hanging over the Nation. By the end of that first school year, her professors' demeanor had changed, as they were forced to read commercial messages aloud during lectures. That went on for the rest of her time at school, but she had already learned to ignore those messages, never blaming the professors for their desire to hold onto what left of their public service.

At every store, the quality of goods declined with the decrease in regulation. One could never know what had been made where, with what kind of labor. One had no choice but to purchase what was available or seek the black market of quality products with prices fewer and fewer could afford. Evelyn never begrudged the producers of quality goods—she considered it the moral duty of every manufacturer to design and build quality products. She never begrudged the money they made. She only wished of employers she patronised that they treat their workers as well as they themselves would want to be treated. Few did, she felt, unless of course they would want to be treated in those ways. The designers of products were rarely the leaders of corporations. Those who possessed the creative impulse, however, tended to treat their workers more morally, understanding the value of creation and labor. The rest were parasites along for the ride, swimming in the waters of others' creativity and labor.

The creative and hard-working ones usually suffered abuse and ostracism for their efforts. Vincent Van Gogh was the classic case. His poverty and struggle to gain acceptance were usually romanticised, but they filled Evelyn with outrage and longing for a better, more just world. The man's talent was immense, but because (like most serious artists) he lacked the sense and skill required to succeed in business, he died in despair. Most people knew and understood this. How many musicians had signed bad contracts? The business gene and the creativity gene almost never went together. It was one or the other, and one usually took unfair advantage of the other.

Evelyn had never begrudged artists (or anyone else) who succeeded on their own merits, however; she only felt glad for them. She wanted every talented, creative person to survive and thrive. The environment was not designed for this in any way, however; if anything, the deck was stacked against them by crooked laws and policies.

Evelyn grew into adulthood seeing imagination and talent all about her and almost never acknowledged or rewarded. She wondered why this should be the case; the goods and services offered for purchase, presented as if they were imaginative or talented, were almost never the products of imagination or talent beyond copying and watering down someone else's idea—the chief ability of her age seemed to be that of doing what was merely adequate, mediocre. Evelyn wondered why human beings should settle for this, then realized they were the ones creating it. Most customers seemed to expect nothing better. When better appeared they flocked to it as one would expect, but then that product became the new standard to mimic, and the work of a few creative minds became the template for another generation's pirating, not the inspiration for a renaissance of creativity across the board. In every field, the exceptional man or woman was the exception. When she saw architecture, for example, in which form followed function with aesthetic beauty, it took her breath away to stare at it and wonder why most houses in America were ugly square boxes that felt like prisons. What was wrong with most of Humanity, that it settled for being treated that way by businesses? What was wrong with businesses that they considered it acceptable to offer such goods and services?

Instead of improving and enhancing the World, the goal of most businesses seemed to Evelyn to be that of attacking and murdering the Planet Earth. Then it seemed to her that most—not all—business leaders were too shortsighted even to realize they were harming their planet and their people. Then she wondered most of all why business presented itself as admirable. She was supposed to admire, let alone wish to emulate, the success of those who raped, sacked, and pillaged everything they could? Where was the morality, she wondered?

Evelyn defined “evil” as “unmitigated self-interest”, and the evil she saw from American businesses, but above all the inadequate mediocrity of even that evil, left Evelyn numb. *Do you really expect me to want to buy your product, hire your service, or patronise your business?* Evelyn had found herself thinking countless times. *What kind of moron do you think I am?* Insulting intelligence seemed to be the World's business model. *At least I have Lucie*, she thought.

Lucie and Evelyn had met and become roommates at Patrick Henry University, where Evelyn studied journalism and Lucie studied marketing, which was not enough to get her ahead when the Galt Panic hit. Lucie's first job after being graduated was that of selling robot vacuum cleaners by telephone, but nobody needed a middle-man anymore when the Internet did the job. Besides the usual colorful language inviting Lucie to go places and do things with herself, Lucie had heard such choice responses as:

“No extra money, sorry.”

“The one we have sucks fine.”

“You can't be serious. Robots are passé. I've got a girl who does everything for five bucks a day—and I mean *everything*, if you know what I mean.”

“The dirt ‘round here ain't goin' nowhere fast, darlin'.”

And:

“Call me back after supper, when I won’t be home.”

The low pay and constant rejection wore away at her soul, but she could not quit until she found her first barista job, after which her life became somewhat less unpleasant. Sometime in 2026, she telephoned Evelyn, and they had been roommates again since.

As was usual, Lucie would not be home until about midnight. As was usual, Evelyn ordered supper from a nearby Chinese place, Café Evergreen. She lived for their cashew chicken. When she came home, she took off her coat, her clothes, her vest, and even her breathing mask. The windows were all closed.

The clear breathing masks, which filtered and purified air before breathing, had only gone on the market in the past three years in response to deaths from airborne contaminants formerly regulated by the EPA. PM2.5 particulate levels had shot up in just a few years to about 600 micrograms per cubic meter in most American cities, on track to match the worst excesses of pre-regulation Beijing. The masks were designed not to interfere with speaking or recognizing facial features, clinging to faces as would cellophane or a sandwich bag. The masks had taken some getting used to but had become parts of everyone’s appearance, to the point that not wearing one had become more noticeable than wearing one. They had to be taken off to eat, but over the mouth they had porous membranes to allow breathing and speaking, and no one would want to eat outdoors, due to the smells of the pollution in the air. Evelyn, like most other Americans, remembered being able to go outside without one, but this was just another price of progress in West’s and Lang’s America. She didn’t think about the masks any more than she thought about her earrings once they were on.

The masks filtered out many of the toxins in the unregulated air but not all. Cancer and other death rates were rising, but the masks were the best one could do. Fortunately, they were relatively inexpensive at one dollar each. Unfortunately, they didn’t last very long, as the very toxins they blocked caused them to disintegrate. Each one lasted about a week. “Planned obsolescence” her father had called this method of manufacturing, which was the method employed by most manufacturers of most products, even products used by the government, which were only one degree better than the products made for private use.

As was usually the case, Evelyn did some work, some light reading, and some television watching (TNN’s documentary *Is There More to Life Than Work?*) until Lucie got home at about eleven-forty-five wearing a hat with two effigy coffee plants growing out of it.

“Hi,” Lucie said when she got home. “What can I get started for you?” she joked, taking off her hat and breathing mask.

“A robot vacuum cleaner,” Evelyn joked, causing Lucie to raise her eyebrows. “And better jobs for idle men.”

“What happened?” Lucie asked.

“Oh, just another couple of clowns looking for a good time.” She flipped a page of a magazine. “Or to provide one.”

“Here?” Lucie indicated the surrounding neighborhood, her hand saying, “Nearby?”

Evelyn nodded and said, “Yeah.”

“Let me guess: you kicked their asses.” Lucie walked into the living room and plopped into a chair opposite Evelyn to take off her shoes.

“I encouraged them to leave.”

“Remind me to pay you for protection.”

“You don’t need to pay me.”

“Now who’s bad for labor?”

“You’re right. You can pay me. And more labor laws would be good.”

“Tell me about it,” Lucie said. “Start with the minimum wage, so we can get those creeps off the streets.”

“And deprive you of the joys of working for five dollars an hour?”

“What are those joys again?” Lucie asked.

“I don’t know. More money to put back into the Economy? Nah, that couldn’t be it,” Evelyn joked. “On the bright side, the minimum-wage restoration is item one on Sterling’s agenda.”

“Yeah, I know,” Lucie said in a tired voice. She asked, “What is with these people who look normal and then start shouting that God is coming?”

“What?”

“Yeah. It happened again today, at Coffee Corner.”

“This is New York: everything happens here.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s just fucked up.”

“That’s true.”

“So, how’d the class go?”

“Oh, you know, it was fascinating psychology. The professor called Galt a terrorist. I think he had to do what he did. Sometimes it is moral to withhold aid, though sometimes it is not.”

“It depends on whether the proposed aid recipient is moral or deserving, I suppose.”

“The professor said it was wrong to hold us all hostage by striking, even in that case.”

“Well, no one is obligated to employ others in business ventures. Nobody forces me to serve *venti* iced chai lattes.”

“Yeah, but if you recall, Thompson made it illegal to quit one’s job, which made Galt’s refusal to contribute his talents a moral act. The problem is he also advocated never giving anyone anything. That’s a ridiculous overreaction that led to the current state of affairs. Imagine a world in which no one gave anyone anything without payment! We’d never know any cooperation or even love.”

“You make a strong case.”

“These are just my opinions.”

“I’m sure you’re not alone in them.”

“The class didn’t seem to get it. They were young, just young enough not to know any different, not to remember what a shock it was to everyone when the wrong man won the Presidency.”

“Perhaps your next article should explain it to them.”

“Too controversial. You know Jo would never put anything that serious in the magazine, the magazine that exists to distract the elites from more serious but pressing concerns.”

“You never know.”

“Hmm.” Evelyn felt that Lucie was just being kind. The truth was that if she felt she had an exciting story idea, her big break, she felt she would pitch it to the Stars. But Evelyn completely lacked inspiration. After an uneventful evening, Evelyn retired for the night no more inspired than before. She had gained some good material, but what to do with it? Her ideas up to then had been to write about how Rand’s philosophy had motivated John Galt to think only of and for his own interests, to the detriment of his followers, but she just didn’t see how she could make finger-wagging interesting. She couldn’t. No one could. She would have to wait for something to happen. The Muse could never be forced.

“Oh,” Evelyn said to herself, then went to the door of Lucie’s room. “Is the toilet fixed yet?”

Lucie shook her head. “Still clogged.”

“Plunging still not working?”

Lucie shook her head again.

“It’s been clogged for a month.”

“As previously discussed, they don’t care. They said they’d snake it eventually.”

“Yeah, right. And the disposal?”

“They said they won’t call a plumber if it’s our fault.”

“Is it our fault the disposal clogs because it’s old and weak?”

“Apparently.”

Damn, Evelyn thought. She needed to relieve herself before bed. She stood, put her breathing mask and coat back on, and picked up her keys to go out.

“You’re not going out this late?” Lucie asked.

“When you gotta go, you gotta go,” Evelyn said. “You make it home safe every night.” Lucie said nothing.

Evelyn had been making restroom trips to the grocery store at the corner for a month, fantasizing each time about relieving herself on her landlord’s doorstep, but she had forgot to stop there on her way home, and now it was approaching one in the morning. She reached the store, bought some vegetables, and visited the restroom. Fortunately, she made it back home safely.

As she lay in bed soon after, ignoring the advertisements on the screen on her ceiling, Evelyn remembered where she had been, almost ten years before, when Galt’s proclamation had

burst forth from the airwaves, overriding the broadcast rights of all radio companies. She did not necessarily admire those companies—she rarely thought about them—, but she recognized that their right to do business in America and decide what they would broadcast was being infringed by one man, one megalomaniacal man.

“I swear—” Galt had ended, “—by my life and my love of it—that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine.” And he had presented this imposition onto everyone’s lives as a virtue to be boasted, not as thoughtless disregard for all interests but his own. Why shouldn’t one live for the sake of another, or for the sake of more than one other?

“All motives are selfish,” a friend at university had said to Evelyn in response to Galt.

“What if we sacrifice ourselves for another?”

“Selfish.”

“How?”

“Our own reasons to do so and the desire to save the person are clearly paramount. Our will rules regardless.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Evelyn said. “You’re saying that, no matter how bad the situation, I still have a decision to make, power and control to exercise, and I am going to impose my will upon even this terrible situation.”

“Exactly. It’s the same with suicide, which is more and more often acknowledged to be a selfish act, whether the motive is to escape suffering or not. *I* am paramount. *My* will is paramount. I am an island, and a dictator, rolled into one. I will decide for you even whether you will continue to experience my company,” Evelyn’s friend had said years before.

This is why suicide is illegal, Evelyn had mused often since: violence against any member of Society, even oneself, is violence against Society.

Evelyn drifted off to sleep imagining herself on a tropical island. She dreamt of being chased through a jungle by savages. Their honesty struck her: they wanted to kill—perhaps even to eat—her, and they didn’t blink about it. This was the honesty of the hunter toward the hunted. She woke with a start, wondering how many people she had met in this civilized country would chase her with a spear if given the opportunity. The answer was probably more than she would like to know. It was a dog-eat-dog world, after all. No law or program could change that, she knew. Laws didn’t prevent traffic accidents. Or drug deals. We must still rely on the morality, wisdom, and justice of our fellow human beings, Evelyn knew. This thought kept her awake for a few minutes before she fell back into a restless sleep.

The next day she would have to tell Jo she didn’t have any ideas yet. Perhaps she could suggest one.

Waking was difficult. Evelyn had never been a morning person, and whenever her circadian rhythms were disrupted she was a wreck the next day.

She made coffee and made a payment to check the news. Nothing big had happened. Christmas commercials continued *ad nauseum*. She would be grateful when the holiday had ended. The President-Elect's cabinet choices were being speculated about by news channels that did not have news to report.

Evelyn admired Laurence Sterling as a man of vision. She had voted for him the month before. Because presidential terms had been increased to six years before the election, his would be the first such term. Evelyn felt both relieved and glad to know he would have more time to clean up the mess. She just hoped nothing happened to prevent him from doing so.

Evelyn ate ignoring the advertisements piped in through the wall, showered ignoring the advertisements on the screen in the shower-stall wall, dressed ignoring the advertisements in her bedroom, and got onto the #6 train to Grand Central, then the shuttle train west to Times Square.

Evelyn did not notice the sights, the sounds, and the smells of the City any more when she was outdoors than when she was indoors. She had learned years before that the secret to survival and thrival in the City was to block everything out, whether in the shower, in the living room, on the street, or in the subway. She came out of the ground at Times Square oblivious as always, broken headphones on as always, neutral expression on her face as always when in public. It was the safest response to unwelcome street advances, too.

Evelyn had read of Galt, Rand, and politics as academic matters for years. Even when West and Lang had begun to transform American society into a gladiatorial game, Evelyn had been shielded from most of the immediate effects by her father then her own job. She was lucky and she knew it. That was why she could think and write about what was going on. That was why it was her duty. She had the opportunity and the talent; she had to write and say what was happening for that worker who couldn't stop working every waking hour away, who couldn't afford to go to the doctor, whose work was the cause of his or her own death. Hundreds, thousands had died over the past five or more years as deregulation took hold. Newspaper stories of the elderly and infirm simply dying wherever they happened to be. There had been nursing homes, Evelyn knew, where the poor elderly could receive care; no longer. Now those same men and women, for that is what they were, died in their meager apartments, on the streets, or in the homes of anyone who would take them in. Evelyn saw the occasional dazed and confused elderly person, half dressed, on the sidewalk when she walked in the City. Sometimes the person would speak with strangers as if he or she knew them. Sometimes, as a result of health or immediate physical needs, the person would become frighteningly belligerent. In almost all cases, the person was soiled by his or her own waste. Evelyn cared, but there was very little she could do on a personal scale, so she (as had most others) had become conditioned to avoid these victims of social neglect. Her father used to give them Grayson Pills that he carried with him for the

purpose. “Under the circumstances, it’s the only humane thing to do,” he would explain. Evelyn worked to help them on a larger scale. The blessing, she reminded herself, was that most of them didn’t even know where they were. That morning she did not see any such people, and she felt relieved.

As Evelyn walked from Times Square toward the *World Times* building on Eighth Avenue, between Fortieth and Forty-First Streets, she was struck, as always, by the building’s beauty.

The *World Times* Building consisted of two tall, thin pyramids designed to look like a giant if upside down “W”. Its shining silver exterior always reminded Evelyn of the top of the nearby Chrysler building. It seemed to stand for truth, Evelyn thought, hoping it would always stand there. She felt fortunate to be a part of an organization working to make the World a better place, not just to pad its bottom line.

The interior of the building was functional, not ostentatious. The exterior walls of the upper offices featured long sections of glass allowing sunlight and breathtaking views of Manhattan for dozens of workers. Why shouldn’t they love their workplace?

Like the clouds in the Sky floating over New York, the words for which the *Times* was renowned floated across the World, as they had done for over a hundred years, enlightening the minds of generations. The *World Times*, thought Evelyn, “Nothing But the Truth”—the proud motto by which she had worked for over ten years, in contrast to the words and deeds of many other organizations.

It occurred to Evelyn that the *World Times* building, as large and as grand as it was, was made not with Rearden Steel and glass but words, and not just words but truth. “A man’s word is his bond,” went the old saying, and Evelyn knew that the WT building was made and rested on the accuracy of every single word that came out of that building under the *World Times* banner.

Evelyn walked across the lobby, and as she had every day, she looked at the statue in its center, on a raised dais, of a family in a park. An elderly couple, grandparents, sat on a park bench behind a middle-aged couple standing watching their two small children playing. The grandfather read a newspaper, a copy of the *World Times*. The scene was one of intergenerational civic harmony aided by the spread of knowledge. It always filled Evelyn with compassion and good feelings toward her fellow human beings. To Evelyn this statue embodied the *Times*’ commitment to inform and serve the citizenry of the Republic, each of whom deserved the power of knowledge regardless of personal wealth. Yes, the *Times* charged for its work, but only the least that it could and still function, which sometimes caused the *Times* headaches in competition with other, flashier, less conscientious news sources.

No one printed on paper anymore; everything was digital, usually mobile. But the *Times* worldwide information empire survived on subscriptions of a dollar a day. Every day, everyone wanted the latest and most diligently-collected information. “Times may change, but the *Times* will not,” was the unofficial motto of those who worked there.

All that Evelyn wanted of life was contained in the desire to speak and write the truth for the benefit of herself, her newspaper (news organizations had long since gone digital entirely; the term was kept over out of nostalgia), her country, and world. She was a writer, and that was what writers did. Her father, Andrew, now deceased, had been a lawyer, helping those less fortunate not out of any misplaced feeling but out of love for his fellow man. It was he who had taught Evelyn the power of words to harm or heal. It was thanks to him that she wanted to be the best journalist she could be, to show the World the truth.

Her aunt had been an architect, using her talents to help government, private organizations, businesses, and families function. When President West and his successor destroyed the middle class, her business dried up. Now her aunt Meighan had been reduced to working at a convenience store in the mornings and a gas station in the evenings just to scrape by.

Everyone was paid for his or her services; this was the means of capitalism, the tool of the trade, but it was the means, not the end. The end was what one made it. *Mussolini made the trains run on time, but there is more to life than making trains run on time*, Evelyn thought.

“*Nothing But the Truth*,” Evelyn thought again as she walked though the halls and rode the elevator up to her office and desk in the Sunday magazine offices at the *World Times*.

Evelyn walked into her office, took off her jacket and hung it up, then sat at her desk and turned her computer on. Her colleague Peter, at the next desk, looked up and said, “It’s more of the same. The dynamic is unchanged. He does his best, they fight him tooth and nail. Really, it’s getting boring.”

“Good morning, Peter,” Evelyn said. “I am sad the Nation’s affairs do not amuse you more. If you’re bored, I always suggest getting out of the office and into the World.”

“Oh, God,” he said. “Not *that*. You’re no fun.”

“That’s what they tell me.”

He turned back to his work after a short commercial message flashed across his screen, this one cruelly advertising a vacation package in the Bahamas for \$10,000, almost a year’s pay.

Evelyn went through her phone and computer messages. There was nothing eventful. She sat back and sighed. Her phone rang. It was Jo.

“Got a minute?” she asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“Come on over,” she said.

“Okay,” she said.

She hung up, got up, grabbed her notebook, and walked through the main work space to Jo’s office, in one of the “corners” of the round floor—the two spires of the upside-down “W” were rounded. She knocked on the door though Jo expected her.

“Come in,” Evelyn heard her say. She did and shut the door, then sat opposite her.

“Thanks for coming,” her boss said. She wryly observed to herself that she was her boss; of course she came.

“You’re welcome,” she said.

“I know you’ve been working on that Rand piece, which doesn’t really fit into the Sunday magazine format,” she said.

“Jo, you said I could make it safe and conventional, more of a hypothetical, ‘What if she influenced him?’ kind of piece—”

“Yes, I’m not asking you to stop.”

Evelyn stopped short.

“I called you in here because something is going on that might be of relevance. You might want to look into it. One of my friends at the Commerce Department called to say that productivity at the Big Two has greatly exceeded expectations in the past few months, while at the same time they’ve got much higher absenteeism than before.”

“But who’s buying them, and how can they make them if their employees aren’t coming to work?”

“He doesn’t know, and neither do I. I thought you might want to find out.”

“I’d love to,” Evelyn said.

“That’s good, because—and, no offense to what you’re doing—I think you’re spinning your wheels here right now. On the other hand, it could relate to your discussion of economics, provide you with a new angle that opens up the whole story. I took the liberty of booking you a flight.” She picked up a small envelope from her desk and offered it to Evelyn. “Here you go.”

Evelyn took the envelope from her and looked at the tickets. The flight was scheduled for that afternoon!

“I thought you’d still want to do some things before you left—like pack,” Jo said.

“Thanks.” Evelyn smiled despite herself.

“Thank *you*. Hey, at least it’ll get you out of town for a few days. And if this turns up anything, who knows? You could be the next Edward R. Murrow.”

“Yeah, right.” Evelyn stood. “Thanks.”

“See you later. Have a safe flight.”

Evelyn took a step toward the door, then paused.

“Why doesn’t the national desk handle this?” she asked.

Jo looked up from her tablet computer. “Because Watkins doesn’t think it’s important. If you’d like I could try to persuade him again . . .” Jo reached for her phone.

Evelyn glared at her playfully. “I’m going.”

“I thought so.”

Spinning my wheels . . . Evelyn didn’t think there would be anything to find in Detroit, a burned-out wasteland surrounding two car factories too big to relocate. Still, a report of increased productivity, especially for a few months in a row, was noteworthy. In the past several years, productivity had fallen as Americans had moved to the cities and switched to buses, bicycles, or feet, even abandoning their cars and trucks with homes to which they did not expect

to return. Most of America was no longer inhabited, its grand highway system decaying and untraveled, except of course for the occasional private-security company on assignment or nefarious nogoodnik. To drive on the highways, Evelyn imagined, would be to court great danger. One could drive for days without seeing another human being, and that would be if all went well. To encounter another vehicle on those long stretches would not bode well.

Speaking of wheels, why are their car sales improving?

Evelyn went back to her desk and put her jacket back on. Peter noticed and watched her from his desk. She pushed her chair in and picked up her work bag.

“Going somewhere?”

“On assignment. Detroit.”

“Detroit?” Peter was genuinely concerned. “I hope you’re not going alone. You’re far too innocent-looking.”

Evelyn picked up her purse and gave Peter a look.

“Don’t be deceived,” she said and walked away.

“You’re doing what?” Lucie asked as she dressed for her next shift. It was odd that Evelyn was home during Lucie’s brief stopover.

“I’m going to Detroit.”

“It was good knowing you.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Can’t you just make a phone call?”

“Jo thought it might be advantageous to go in person.”

“Advantageous to who? Or to whom? I can never remember.”

“If there’s ‘to’, it’s ‘whom’. I need to be discreet.”

“Be discreet. Be alive too.”

“Okay, Lucie. Have a good day at work.”

“You mean a good *second* day. I already worked one shift. On the bright side, there’s nothing more exciting than a triple *trenta* decaf half-foam skinny latte.”

“Skinny?”

“Nonfat.”

“Ah.”

The truth was that Evelyn was concerned too. Detroit had sunk into anarchy when Chrysler went out of business for the last time. The auto maker had been troubled in decades past, but it had lifted itself out of bankruptcy and recovered before the Strike. The loss of its leaders proved a fatal blow. Ford and General Motors had survived somehow at greatly diminished capacity. The workers who lost their jobs had rioted; the privatization of the police force by that State’s governor had been the final mistake. Who knew the officers would side with

the rioters? The police had used cars, armored vehicles, and heavier weapons to destroy the Chrysler plant, then turned their rage on the city. The Governor could have called the National Guard, but he was afraid that if they succeeded in restoring order the citizens of Michigan would oust him for letting it all happen; better just to let the few loyal private cops protect his mansion. One of those cops limited the Governor's term with a bullet, but because the national government was by then in crisis, Michigan was left to fend for itself. There was a new governor, doing her best for the State with limited resources, but the City of Detroit was a wasteland, most of its law-abiding residents having fled, its two remaining factories hidden behind high fences and reinforced Rearden Metal. Visitors had to be careful to avoid . . . the remaining residents of Detroit, many of whom had turned to lives of crime. Evelyn could be killed or worse. A young woman such as herself would be considered a valuable commodity in certain parts of the World in former times. These days the buyer could even be local, and there would be no one nearby to help her. Despite Evelyn's brave banter, she would have to be careful, and she would be.