

DEVERS BRANDEN AND AYN RAND

Authors Note: In the pre-final version of Judgment Day there was a Part 4, which dealt with the two decades in California following Patrecia's and my departure from New York in 1968. This was cut and replaced with a brief Epilogue, because dramatically the story of this book ends when Patrecia and I depart for Los Angeles. Of all the material I cut, I regretted most the omission of an extraordinary encounter, or series of encounters, between my (now former) wife Devers and Ayn Rand, twelve years after the Rand/Branden break, three years after Patrecia's death, and less than two years before Rand's death. The excised story follows.

A day or two after our arrival in New York, out for a walk, Devers and I stood in front of 120 East 34th Street, the building I had made a prison for so many years. "Here it is," I said to Devers. "Here is where so much of it happened. Six floors up—6G—is Ayn's apartment, where she still lives...."

Next day I was scheduled to tape a television interview at 6 p.m. Devers and I separated at noon; I had a meeting with my publisher. Devers said she wanted to do some shopping and have her hair cut. We agreed to meet back in our hotel room at 4 o'clock. When she did not appear by 5:20, I became agitated. She knew I had to be at the television studio. What could have delayed her? It was unlike her to be late and not to call. She finally telephoned at 5:28, and I could hear the exaggerated calm in her voice, as she said, "I know, I know, but don't wait for me. I'll meet you at the station." "But where are you?" I asked, bewildered, and she answered, "With Ayn. I've been here all afternoon." There was a long moment of silence. Then I said, "See you soon."

I hung up the phone and began to laugh.

At the television station, everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. I was impatient to be alone with Devers and to hear what happened. When the interview was finally over, we rushed off to a restaurant for a dinner we barely touched.

Devers said, "I was at Ayn's for over five hours! Toward the end, she was reluctant for me to go. That's why I was so late."

"Take your time," I urged. "Try to tell me everything."

"I arrived in Ayn's apartment building around 12:30. I told the doorman I was a journalist and had an appointment with Miss Rand and had arrived early. He said Miss Rand had gone out and I asked if I could wait for her inside. Reluctantly the doorman agreed, and that's how I got in. Taking the elevator to the sixth floor, I waited down the hall from 6G for an hour-and-a-half—until the elevator door opened and I saw an elderly lady with a scarf around her head walk to the door of 6G and I recognized it was Ayn.

"Nathaniel, I didn't want to tell you about this in advance. I didn't want you to try to talk me out of it. I just wanted to do it."

"But why?"

"Because you two never had the kind of ending you deserved."

"I know. I wanted a different ending too, once. That's why I telephoned her a few years ago. But it's hopeless. Well, anyway, tell me what happened."

Devers continued, "At the sight of her small figure and somewhat disheveled appearance, I was surprised. Could this be the giant about whom

I had heard so much? Stepping forward, I said, 'Miss Rand?'

"Ayn's key was in the door of the lock. She looked up abruptly. 'Yes?'

"May I speak to you? My name is Devers Branden.'

"What do you want?' Ayn asked—instantly suspicious. 'What did you say your name was?'

"I'm Nathaniel Branden's wife—Devers Branden. I would very much like to speak to you.'

"I knew that my only chance of success was to be completely natural and straightforward—and that my only hope would be Ayn's curiosity.

"Ayn looked shocked, but her eyes were studying me even as she growled, 'What do you want? Did he send you here?' She did not say your name.

"The door of the apartment was now half open and I moved in slightly, blocking her from entering, and I leaned against the entrance with an air of authority, and said that I had come here on my own and that you knew nothing about it. I could see that in spite of being disoriented and taken aback Ayn was a little intrigued.

"Right away, she began denouncing the doorman and threatened to have him fired. I told her it was not the doorman's fault, I lied to him, and when I explained what I had done she smiled, almost in spite of herself, and said, 'Ingenious.' We talked about this for a few more minutes and I could see her softening. Then I opened the door slightly and said, 'Do we have to remain talking in the hall?' It's a little chilly. Won't you invite me in?'

"She said, 'What's your purpose in being here?' I didn't answer immediately, but asked again if we could go in.

"Looking a bit disoriented, she led me into the apartment. Like Ayn herself, the living room seemed faded and in disrepair; perhaps it had once been beautiful but now it appeared dingy. To establish my presence more firmly, I immediately took off my coat.

"I sat on the sofa and Ayn again demanded to know what I wanted. I got up, walked around the room, and studied Frank's paintings hung on the walls, conscious of Ayn watching me. I was not going to let her set the rhythm or pace. She asked if you still had that painting of Frank's—you know, the large nude—and did you want to sell it. I answered that it was special to you and you would not part with it. She asked that I tell you that if you ever wanted to sell it, she wanted to buy it. Then I sat down again and told her that you had not sent me and that my purpose here was my own.

"I began to talk about my understanding of what Ayn and you had once meant to each other and how sad it was that your relationship had ended as it did, with so much pain and anger. Ayn began to protest, denying that she'd ever felt any pain—which I ignored. I said to her, 'The ending deserved more honesty and dignity than either of you brought to it. I would like to see, not a new friendship between you two—I understand that's impossible—but a different ending. That's really all I'm here for.'

"She said angrily that you and she could never be friends and I told her again that that was not what I was proposing. 'I'm proposing that you meet in person or talk on the telephone—just once—no one else need ever know—this is not for the public, it's for the two of you—just to acknowledge what those eighteen years you were together meant, and to say good bye properly.'

“Did he tell you he meant something to me?” Ayn demanded harshly, and I answered, “Yes, but your behavior at the time of the break and afterwards told me much more eloquently.”

“Ayn looked at me as if I were a strange creature from another planet who had no grasp of life on earth, and demanded, ‘What did he tell you about me?’ I looked directly into her eyes, and said, ‘Everything.’”

“She was sitting across from me, in a chair. She got up and stood over me, almost threateningly, and asked again, ‘What did he tell you?’ I answered, ‘I’m only here because Nathaniel told me so much about those eighteen years and how much they meant to him. How much he learned. How you were his mentor, his friend, his partner’—I deliberately did not say lover; not that early in our meeting; I wanted to leave it abstract.

“You see, Ayn,” I said to her, ‘if Nathaniel had spoken of those years primarily as pain, or if he had spoken of you primarily in the negative, there would be no reason for me to be here. But he conveyed so many happy and positive memories. You two loved each other and—’ She interrupted at that sentence and demanded, ‘Did he tell you that?’ I replied that you had, and she said, ‘I never loved him—never!’ Then she demanded, ‘Why would I wish to communicate with him now?’ I answered that at the time of the break there were a lot of false accusations, a lot of things said that weren’t true, and a lot of anger that wiped away everything wonderful from the earlier years—and that in the world as I understood it, this was wrong, and that a better ending to the story deserved to be written for both of you.

“She asked—her voice was shaking—if I knew what he had done. She would not say your name. I said yes I did. She said, ‘And you still expect me to communicate with him?’” I answered yes, that was what I wanted.

“Then she became very angry and said she would not discuss you, there was nothing to discuss, and if I wanted to remain I must not mention his name again.” Recounting this, Devers smiled. “When she said, if I wanted to remain, I knew we had made a connection. Even when she shouted, she kept studying me; her eyes never left me. She was curious about you—and about me.

“I got up again and went back to Frank’s paintings. She was impressed by the things I said about them. She told me that Frank had died the year before, and I said I knew that, and she began speaking of him with great sadness. Pointing to stacks of papers and letters scattered throughout the apartment, she said, ‘I’m not able to do anything. I don’t write, I don’t answer letters, I don’t look at contracts. There are important matters here, and I do nothing.’ Then, as if realizing how intimately she was speaking, she became angry again and demanded to know why you had sent me here. Again I assured her that you knew nothing of this meeting. She was very skeptical. At the same time, I could see she was becoming increasingly intrigued.

“I think she liked my straightforwardness; she could see that I was not afraid of her.

“Then she asked if I had read your interview in Reason magazine, and began to speak of it with great indignation—almost as if that were the worst offense you had ever committed. This completely bewildered me. I told her that I didn’t recall the piece too clearly, but could think of nothing in it to distress her that much.

“I wanted to cut that off, so I stood up and said I was thirsty and did she mind if I helped myself to a drink of water or juice. Then I walked into the kitchen. ‘What are you doing?’ she cried, following me. I opened the refrigerator, located a glass, and was pouring myself fruit juice. She protested that I was a guest in her house and that if I wanted juice, she would serve

it to me. I told her I didn’t want to bother her. She could see that all her shouting meant nothing to me.

“She reminded me of my mother—difficult and irascible and always trying to intimidate—and I had years of experience in coping with this behavior.

“She asked me what I knew about Objectivism and I said, ‘I’ve read your novels naturally, but I’m no expert on the philosophy.’ ‘How could you be,’ she asked scornfully, ‘if he was your teacher? He certainly is not qualified to instruct anyone in Objectivism!’ I just looked at her, raised an eyebrow, and said, ‘Miss Rand, that really is a very foolish remark to make about a man to whom you dedicated Atlas Shrugged, and who was your spokesman to the world for Objectivism, and who you described as your intellectual heir.’ She stared back, almost menacingly.

“She began to question me about myself, and was fascinated by my background in the business world. We talked for a long time about that and she became much warmer and friendlier. ‘That’s why I like you!’ she exclaimed. ‘That’s why I can talk to you! You’re a businessman!’ It was the strangest thing, she kept calling me a ‘businessman.’ But now and again she would remember whose wife I was and then she would become suspicious all over again. Several times, when she became impatient because I didn’t see things her way, she called me ‘young woman,’ until finally I objected, informing her that I was a grandmother, which she couldn’t seem to absorb at all. I also told her I did not appreciate the tone of voice in which she spoke to me, and, interestingly enough, she quieted down.

“At one point she began to speak abusively of you and I stopped her. I said, ‘You’re talking about my husband. I will not allow it—not in my presence.’ She stopped immediately. ‘I appreciate your position,’ she said. And I felt she was looking at me with respect.

“She wanted to know in detail what you had told me about the past and I could see her registering the fact that you had not spared yourself, had acknowledged what you had done without defensiveness or alibis or evasion, and in the course of telling her I was also able to communicate what she had meant to you, how important she was in your life.

Feeling gratitude for what Devers wanted to accomplish, I said, “She won’t retain it; not Ayn; she would have to re-examine too much. She would have to question the whole structure of her life.”

“It was funny: she would tell me not to mention your name, but it was always she who brought the conversation back to you. She wanted to know what you were doing professionally, how we lived, and were you still interested in ideas. She said, ‘You’re not the kind of woman I expected him to marry.’ When I asked what she expected, she answered, ‘A non-intellectual hausfrau. But you, you’re intelligent, you have self-confidence, you’re a businessman. It took courage for you to come here, even if I do not approve of your manner of doing so.’”

Knowing Ayn as well as I did, it was very easy to imagine the scene and to understand Ayn’s responses to Devers.

Devers went on, “Ayn continued probing, asking questions, and I told her about the home we had bought in the mountains, in Lake Arrowhead, and mentioned that that’s where you do most of your writing. I told her that I wanted you to have an atmosphere in which to think and create, away from the world, and where we would have a lot of time alone together, and she remarked that I was a wife as well as a ‘businessman,’ and she was impressed by that. The details of our life clearly fascinated her; she kept pressing for more information.

“She asked about your dog, Pussy Cat, and when I told her she had died, Ayn said, “Now that I feel sorry about. I know how much he loved Pussy Cat.” I was stunned. I said, ‘You express sympathy about Pussy Cat and say nothing about the death of his wife Patricia?’ She glowered at me and did not answer. I didn’t care what kind of genius she might have been, or how much she might have been hurt by you. To me, this lack of simple humanity was sickening. I wondered: What am I doing here? Everything Nathaniel and other people have told me about the dark side of her is true. I must remember this about her—because I feel a liking for her. I was caught up in the drama of our encounter, just as I think she was.

“In the midst of everything that was happening, several times she asked if I was hungry and could she get me something.

“Throughout the afternoon, there was a lot of sparring between us, almost as if she were testing me. She said, ‘I like the fact that you are not afraid of me.’ I answered that I was not afraid because I had nothing to lose. Then I spoke of what you had told me about the anxiety she had created in the Collective years earlier, and she protested, “I never knew anyone was afraid to speak to me plainly and openly! I would have welcomed honest confrontation!” I answered that she and her work had become their whole world and that they did not want to be ‘excommunicated.’ Again she protested that she knew nothing of their fears, and I answered that she was a supremely intelligent woman and that it was not possible for her not to have known. She dropped the subject; she looked very unhappy.

“At some point in the conversation she said, ‘I’m not sure yet how rational you are, but you appear to be a realist—you have a good sense of reality.’ Later she stunned me by saying, ‘You can come back and talk to me again, if you like, providing you don’t mention his name.’

“She spoke about her philosophy and her writing, which I enjoyed, and when I asked questions she answered in great, very precise detail.

“Whenever I tried to convey sympathy for how hard the break must have been for her, she became rebellious and chastising. How dare I think that you had the power to cause her suffering? That’s how she would talk: How dare I this?—How dare I that? Then she would turn mellow and very friendly again. I said several times that I should go and she encouraged me to stay. She struck me as desperately lonely.

“I mentioned how sad it was that most of the Collective had disappeared from her life, most of her old friends had gone, and she said, almost pathetically, ‘Leonard Peikoff is my friend.’ There was such suffering in the way she spoke, but I knew I should not mention this or she would explode again. I thought: This is the woman who taught all of you respect for the facts of reality? That was just what she didn’t have. I thought she was almost totally trapped inside her own fantasies. It was depressing.

“When I thanked her for her time and said I had to meet you back at the hotel, she suggested I stay a while longer and meet you at the television station! Then she said, ‘If only you weren’t Nathan’s wife!’ This was the first time she pronounced your name. ‘If you weren’t married to him, we could be friends!’

“Finally, I knew I had to go and I stood up and put on my coat. At the door I didn’t think, I just reached out and put my arms around her, and for a moment she rested her head against my chest. She seemed so tired. I leaned down and kissed her. Then she realized her position and pulled away. She looked shy, young, and embarrassed.

“She said she enjoyed me and that if I wanted to call her from California, I could telephone her collect. I told her, gently, that ‘collect’ was not necessary,

you had done quite well for yourself, and that if she didn’t mind, of course I would call her. And then we said good bye.

I felt assailed by a mixture of emotions: admiration for Devers, appreciation for the love that had motivated her, sympathy for Ayn, fascination with the sheer drama of the encounter, nostalgia for the world of my youth, amusement at the two women’s interactions, happiness in contemplating the contrast between my life today and the life I’d had with Ayn.

Devers said, “I don’t think she’ll ever believe you didn’t send me. And yet—she had a good time. I kept saying, over and over again, that no one need ever know if you two were to communicate. And that I was not out to ‘exploit’ her and that I had no secret agenda.”

“Will you call her again?”

“I don’t know. There is so much pain and denial in her about the break-up; maybe she needs that to survive and I shouldn’t try to tamper with it.”

“If she is now maintaining that she never loved me, never suffered over our break—if she is that committed to self-deception—that means that in all these years she has learned nothing, only grown worse. Still—you decide what you want to do.”

“It’s funny, there was only one thing I felt guilty about—as if I were betraying her. And that was that I didn’t tell her that Barbara was writing a biography of her. I know it’s not really my business and I owe her nothing, and yet I felt badly about not telling her, because she spoke so much about people betraying her and because to a degree she trusted me, enough to become a little vulnerable, and when she learns about the biography I think it will be devastating. Knowing that Barbara will expose your affair to the world. I tell you right now, she will not want to live to see that book published. She will die before then.”

We were silent for a long time. Then I noticed a faint smile on Devers’ face and I asked her about it.

“I’m thinking about how pleased she looked—in spite of herself—pleased at the simple level of feminine self-esteem—when I told her how warmly you spoke of your love affair with her. She looked softer, even prettier. She never admitted there was a love affair. But—if only for a few moments—I know I made her a little bit happy. Naturally she can’t admit this to anyone else, but maybe, when she’s alone, her memories can be a little less tragic.”

Devers telephoned Ayn again, a month or two later, from our home in Lake Arrowhead.

“Please don’t push for a meeting between us,” I told her. “Just talk with her, and let whatever happens, happen. But be prepared for the possibility that when you call she may well have disowned and erased everything positive that happened between you, including her invitation that you call, and may treat you like a presumptuous intruder. That would be like her.”

Ayn was surprisingly friendly and receptive. They talked about her desire to resume writing and her difficulty in doing so. They talked about Devers’ growing involvement in the world of psychotherapy. Ayn once again expressed astonishment that I had married a woman of such evident character.

When Devers asked Ayn if she had seen me on a New York television show, Ayn said she had not, but two hours later, in the same conversation, when Devers made some reference to the interview, Ayn said sharply, “When that young man asked him a question, Nathan should not have smiled so much. When one discusses ideas, one must be serious.” Devers did not comment.

Afterward, Devers reported, astonished, “Out of the blue Ayn began telling me what an excellent spokesman for Objectivism I could be, ‘if you were trained properly and if you weren’t his wife.’ I told Ayn I had no interest in being a spokesman for Objectivism, and she demanded again, ‘Then what do you want?’ And again I told her I wanted some communication between Ayn and you. Then, for the first time, I referred to your affair explicitly. ‘Ayn, you two were once lovers.’

“‘We were never lovers!’ Ayn shrieked. ‘We were never really friends! He was a student of mine! Did he tell you we were lovers?’

“‘Of course,’ I answered gently.

“‘Why would he do that? Why?’

“‘I was incredulous and said, ‘Ayn, I’m his wife.’

“‘Almost incoherently, Ayn began to rant that you and she had barely been friends and that you had meant nothing to her.

“‘This was too much. I said, ‘Ayn, all your life you’ve preached the virtue of honesty. And integrity. Are you now saying that you dedicated Atlas Shrugged to a man who was not even important to you?’

“‘There was a long moment of silence. Then Ayn answered, her voice low and muffled, ‘A gentleman would have carried it to his grave.’

“‘I answered, ‘All the years when you and your supporters were attacking him, he never said a word about it. He could have caused you great pain and embarrassment and, if he had chosen to talk, it certainly would have clarified what your conflict was really about. Do you realize that?’

‘Yes,’ Ayn answered grudgingly.

“Then, in one of those switches that by now I had grown accustomed to, Ayn launched into a speech to the effect that she had ‘made’ your reputation and that since coming to California you had done nothing. Whereupon I informed her of the details of your career, and Ayn’s efforts to conceal her surprise were obvious.

“Then, abruptly, she announced that you only stayed with Objectivism as long as you did because of the income it brought you. I felt a bit angry, but I answered quietly that there had never been a great deal of money for you at NBI, but that you never cared that much about money, and that you knew you could earn more on your own. The proof was that in California, starting over again essentially broke, only nine months after opening your office practice, your earnings were already twice what they were during your best year in New York.

“Then she said, no, you only stayed with her because it was good for your career. I reminded her of all the heat and hostility you drew on yourself from the psychology profession because of your championing of Ayn Rand, and how your career had really taken off only after you went out on your own.

“‘Then why didn’t he leave sooner?’ she demanded irritably.

I was stunned. “Don’t you know,” I asked her, “do you really not know what you meant to him? What Objectivism meant to him? What the cause he was fighting for meant to him? After all these years, you still don’t understand what his conflict was?”

“‘If he’s so successful now,’ she stormed, ‘why does he keep chasing me?’

“‘He’s not chasing you. He shares my conviction that you two should have had a better ending, and is open to that, but in the sense you seem to mean, he wants nothing.’

“Ayn said that she was unable to believe that you weren’t after something else, and that you had sent me to her, and I assured her she was wrong but

that I would not raise again the subject of contact between you.

“When this issue was set aside, Ayn became friendly again and asked me when I would next be in New York, and I answered, ‘In a few months.’ ‘You can come and visit,’ Ayn said, ‘if you call first—and if you don’t mention his name.’

Although they talked again on the phone, Devers did not call her when we were next in New York.

Several months later, in New York—on June 17, 1981—Devers did call again, and Ayn said to her, almost reproachfully, “You had told me you were going to see me and never appeared and I never heard from you.”

When Devers invited her to lunch, Ayn said, “Oh, I’m sorry, I can’t. I have one appointment after another. I can’t do it right now.”

She went on to say that she was very busy, she had begun working again, but could not discuss it because it was confidential. “But I’m writing again!”

Ayn said brightly, and Devers answered,

“Congratulations!”

She did not inform Ayn that she knew the “confidential” project was an attempted television adaptation of *Atlas Shrugged*.

Ayn went on to report happily that her energy was coming back. Then—for the first time—she asked how I was, and Devers answered that I was in excellent health and was spending more and more time in Lake Arrowhead, writing. Then she mentioned that she and I were now writing a book together—*The Romantic Love Question-and-Answer Book*. Ayn wanted to know the details of the project and Devers told her.

Ayn expressed pleasure that Devers had called and invited her to call again.

The next day, walking up Lexington Avenue, Devers said to me, “I feel like sending Ayn flowers—to celebrate that she’s writing again!” She sent an expensive and elaborate arrangement.

Knowing Ayn as I did, I should have foreseen that this was a mistake, but my critical antenna was off. It was this gesture on Devers’ part that flung Ayn back into her paranoia.

Ayn knew the hotel at which we were staying and Devers expected a phone call, if only to say thank you. When it did not come, she telephoned Ayn, who immediately said, her voice cold and brusque, “I’m very busy, Devers. You will have to excuse me.”

When Devers asked if she had received the flowers, Ayn said that she had and that she had given them to a friend. “It was very improper for you to do such a thing. If you want to bribe me—for what I don’t know—it’s not enough.”

Devers assured her that her motive was only affection, and Ayn answered that such an ostentatious display made her feel totally misunderstood. She kept talking about Devers’ evident wish to “bribe” her. Utterly bewildered, Devers could not break through Ayn’s wall of hostile suspiciousness.

When she tried to introduce a lighter note, hoping to bring Ayn to her senses, by saying that she wanted to express her delight that Ayn was writing again and that sending flowers “was the American way of celebrating,” Ayn answered sternly, “Do not be presumptuous. I am not accepting lectures on Americanism.”

Hanging up the phone, Devers said to me, “I should have respected my earlier impulse, which was not to pursue this beyond the first two conversations.” I agreed.

What led to Devers’ decision to make one more phone call, some months later, on September 25, was that through our sources we had begun to hear

that Ayn was now telling her friends of Devers' contacting her, only now she was speaking of "this terrible woman who is bothering me and making a pest of herself." Typical Ayn Rand," I said. "Okay, call her one more time. Only this time, as repellent as I find the idea, I want to tape record the conversation. I want you to ask her point-blank about what she's saying to her friends about you." I knew even then that the gesture was futile and that, regardless of what happened, we would never be able to bring ourselves to play the tape for anyone; we never have.

We knew that when Ayn first heard Devers' voice she would be cold and possibly angry, and that Devers would have to keep her on the phone long enough to activate some small part of the old warmth between them. It took her almost twenty-minutes to accomplish this. Finally Ayn said, "Look, I can only think of you as Nathan's wife. We can only make trouble for each other."

Devers then said that she could accept that, but there was one last question she wanted Ayn to answer.

She then repeated the things Ayn was reported to have said about her, and Ayn interrupted, "I never said any of that! I never said anything but good about you! I told you I thought you were intelligent and seemed honest! Who's been spreading these lies?"

Then Ayn said that while she had not made the allegations Devers had heard, she had "told everybody" that Devers' purpose was to achieve a reconciliation between she and I, which I wanted. When Devers protested once again that I wanted no such thing, and asked why Ayn imagined I wanted it, Ayn answered that I had realized that I needed her and could amount to nothing without her.

They talked a few minutes longer, during which time Ayn denied that she had ever invited Devers to call her, then said good bye.

Devers shook her head, a little sadly. "Whatever she might have been once, at her best, when you knew her—it's gone now."

I answered, "What I had loved was already gone by the time I left New York."

"Well—what do you think about all this?"

"I'm glad you had some experience of Ayn Rand. What is there to say? The story is finished."