

GODDESS OF THE MARKET
Ayn Rand and the American Right

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Introduction

\$HER EYES WERE what everyone noticed first. Dark and widely set, they dominated her plain, square face. Her “glare would wilt a cactus,” declared *Newsweek* magazine, but to Ayn Rand’s admirers, her eyes projected clairvoyance, insight, profundity. “When she looked into my eyes, she looked into my soul, and I felt she saw me,” remembered one acquaintance. Readers of her books had the same feeling. Rand’s words could penetrate to the core, stirring secret selves and masked dreams. A graduate student in psychology told her, “Your novels have had a profound influence on my life. It was like being reborn. . . . What was really amazing is that I don’t remember ever having read a book from cover to cover. Now, I’m just the opposite. I’m always reading. I can’t seem to get enough knowledge.” Sometimes Rand provoked an adverse reaction. The libertarian theorist Roy Childs was so disturbed by *The Fountainhead*’s atheism that he burned the book after finishing it. Childs soon reconsidered and became a serious student and vigorous critic of Rand. Her works launched him, as they did so many others, on an intellectual journey that lasted a lifetime.¹

Although Rand celebrated the life of the mind, her harshest critics were intellectuals, members of the social class into which she placed herself. Rand was a favorite target of prominent writers and critics on both the left and the right, drawing fire from Sidney Hook, Whittaker Chambers, Susan Brownmiller, and William F. Buckley Jr. She gave as good as she got, calling her fellow intellectuals “frightened zombies” and “witch doctors.”² Ideas were the only thing that truly mattered, she believed, both in a person’s life and in the course of history. “What are your premises?” was her favorite opening question when she met someone new.

Today, more than twenty years after her death, Rand remains shrouded in both controversy and myth. The sales of her books are

extraordinary. In 2008 alone combined sales of her novels *Atlas Shrugged*, *The Fountainhead*, *We the Living*, and *Anthem* topped eight hundred thousand, an astonishing figure for books published more than fifty years ago.³ A host of advocacy organizations promote her work, and rumors swirl about a major motion picture based on *Atlas Shrugged*. The blogosphere hums with acrimonious debate about her novels and philosophy. In many ways, Rand is a more active presence in American culture now than she was during her lifetime.

Because of this very longevity, Rand has become detached from her historical context. Along with her most avid fans, she saw herself as a genius who transcended time. Like her creation Howard Roark, Rand believed, “I inherit nothing. I stand at the end of no tradition. I may, perhaps, stand at the beginning of one.” She made grandiose claims for Objectivism, her fully integrated philosophical system, telling the journalist Mike Wallace, “If anyone can pick a rational flaw in my philosophy, I will be delighted to acknowledge him and I will learn something from him.” Until then, Rand asserted, she was “the most creative thinker alive.”⁴ The only philosopher she acknowledged as an influence was Aristotle. Beyond his works, Rand insisted that she was unaffected by external influences or ideas. According to Rand and her latter-day followers, Objectivism sprang, Athena-like, fully formed from the brow of its creator.

Commentary on Rand has done little to dispel this impression. Because of her extreme political views and the nearly universal consensus among literary critics that she is a bad writer, few who are not committed Objectivists have taken Rand seriously. Unlike other novelists of her stature, until now Rand has not been the subject of a full-length biography. Her life and work have been described instead by her former friends, enemies, and students. Despite her emphasis on integration, most of the books published about Rand have been essay collections rather than large-scale works that develop a sustained interpretation of her importance.

This book firmly locates Rand within the tumultuous American century that her life spanned. Rand’s defense of individualism, celebration of capitalism, and controversial morality of selfishness can be understood only against the backdrop of her historical moment. All sprang from her early life experiences in Communist Russia and became the most

powerful and deeply enduring of her messages. What Rand confronted in her work was a basic human dilemma: the failure of good intentions. Her indictment of altruism, social welfare, and service to others sprang from her belief that these ideals underlay Communism, Nazism, and the wars that wracked the century. Rand's solution, characteristically, was extreme: to eliminate all virtues that could possibly be used in the service of totalitarianism. It was also simplistic. If Rand's great strength as a thinker was to grasp interrelated underlying principles and weave them into an impenetrable logical edifice, it was also her great weakness. In her effort to find a unifying cause for all the trauma and bloodshed of the twentieth century, Rand was attempting the impossible. But it was this deadly serious quest that animated all of her writing. Rand was among the first to identify the problem of the modern state's often terrifying power and make it an issue of popular concern.

She was also one of the first American writers to celebrate the creative possibilities of modern capitalism and to emphasize the economic value of independent thought. In a time when leading intellectuals assumed that large corporations would continue to dominate economic life, shaping their employees into soulless organization men, Rand clung to the vision of the independent entrepreneur. Though it seemed anachronistic at first, her vision has resonated with the knowledge workers of the new economy, who see themselves as strategic operators in a constantly changing economic landscape. Rand has earned the unending devotion of capitalists large and small by treating business as an honorable calling that can engage the deepest capacities of the human spirit.

At the same time, Rand advanced a deeply negative portrait of government action. In her work, the state is always a destroyer, acting to frustrate and inhibit the natural ingenuity and drive of individuals. It is this chiaroscuro of light and dark—virtuous individuals battling a villainous state—that makes her compelling to some readers and odious to others. Though Americans turned to their government for aid, succor, and redress of grievances ever more frequently during the twentieth century, they did so with doubts, fears, and misgivings, all of which Rand cast into stark relief in her fiction. Her work sounded anew the traditional American suspicion of centralized authority, and helped inspire a broad intellectual movement that challenged the liberal welfare state and proclaimed the desirability of free markets.

Goddess of the Market focuses on Rand's contributions as a political philosopher, for it is here that she has exerted her greatest influence. Rand's Romantic Realism has not changed American literature, nor has Objectivism penetrated far into the philosophy profession. She does, however, remain a veritable institution within the American right. *Atlas Shrugged* is still devoured by eager young conservatives, cited by political candidates, and promoted by corporate tycoons. Critics who dismiss Rand as a shallow thinker appealing only to adolescents miss her significance altogether. For over half a century Rand has been the ultimate gateway drug to life on the right.

The story of Ayn Rand is also the story of libertarianism, conservatism, and Objectivism, the three schools of thought that intersected most prominently with her life. These terms are neither firmly defined nor mutually exclusive, and their meaning shifted considerably during the period of time covered in this book. Whether I identify Rand or her admirers as libertarian, conservative, or Objectivist varies by the context, and my interchangeable use of these words is not intended to collapse the distinctions between each. Rand jealously guarded the word Objectivist when she was alive, but I use the term loosely to encompass a range of persons who identified Rand as an important influence on their thought.

I was fortunate to begin this project with two happy coincidences: the opening of Rand's personal papers held at the Ayn Rand Archives and the beginning of a wave of scholarship on the American right. Work in Rand's personal papers has enabled me to sift through the many biased and contradictory accounts of her life and create a more balanced picture of Rand as a thinker and a human being. Using newly available documentary material I revisit key episodes in Rand's dramatic life, including her early years in Russia and the secret affair with a young acolyte that shaped her mature career. I am less concerned with judgment than with analysis, a choice Rand would certainly condemn. Though I was granted full access to her papers by the Ayn Rand Institute, I am not an Objectivist and have never been affiliated with any group dedicated to Rand's work. I approach her instead as a student and a critic of American thought.

New historical scholarship has helped me situate Rand within the broader intellectual and political movements that have transformed America since the days of the New Deal. At once a novelist and a

philosopher, a moralist and a political theorist, a critic and an ideologue, Rand is difficult to categorize. She produced novels, plays, screenplays, cultural criticism, philosophic essays, political tracts, and commentary on current events. Almost everything she wrote was unfashionable. When artists embraced realism and modernism, she championed Romanticism. Implacably opposed to pragmatism, existentialism, and Freudian psychology, she offered instead Objectivism, an absolutist philosophical system that insisted on the primacy of reason and the existence of a knowable, objective reality. Though she was out of fashion, Rand was not without a tradition or a community. Rather than a lonely genius, she was a deeply engaged thinker, embedded in multiple networks of friends and foes, always driven relentlessly to comment upon and condemn the tide of events that flowed around her.

This book seeks to excavate a hidden Rand, one far more complex and contradictory than her public persona suggests. Although she preached unfettered individualism, the story I tell is one of Rand in relationship, both with the significant figures of her life and with the wider world, which appeared to her alternately as implacably hostile and full of limitless possibility. This approach helps reconcile the tensions that plagued Rand's life and work. The most obvious contradiction lies on the surface: Rand was a rationalist philosopher who wrote romantic fiction. For all her fealty to reason, Rand was a woman subject to powerful, even overwhelming emotions. Her novels indulged Rand's desire for adventure, beauty, and excitement, while Objectivism helped her frame, master, and explain her experiences in the world. Her dual career as a novelist and a philosopher let Rand express both her deep-seated need for control and her genuine belief in individualism and independence.

Despite Rand's lifelong interest in current events, the escapist pleasures of fiction tugged always at the edges of her mind. When she stopped writing novels she continued to live in the imaginary worlds she had created, finding her characters as real and meaningful as the people she spent time with every day. Over time she retreated ever further into a universe of her own creation, joined there by a tight band of intimates who acknowledged her as their chosen leader. At first this closed world offered Rand the refuge she sought when her work was blasted by critics, who were often unfairly harsh and personal in their attacks. But Objectivism as a philosophy left no room for elaboration,

extension, or interpretation, and as a social world it excluded growth, change, or development. As a younger Rand might have predicted, a system so oppressive to individual variety had not long to prosper. A woman who tried to nurture herself exclusively on ideas, Rand would live and die subject to the dynamics of her own philosophy. The clash between her romantic and rational sides makes this not a tale of triumph, but a tragedy of sorts.

CHAPTER ONE

From Russia to Roosevelt

\$IT WAS A wintry day in 1918 when the Red Guard pounded on the door of Zinovy Rosenbaum's chemistry shop. The guards bore a seal of the State of Russia, which they nailed upon the door, signaling that it had been seized in the name of the people. Zinovy could at least be thankful the mad whirl of revolution had taken only his property, not his life. But his oldest daughter, Alisa, twelve at the time, burned with indignation. The shop was her father's; he had worked for it, studied long hours at university, dispensed valued advice and medicines to his customers. Now in an instant it was gone, taken to benefit nameless, faceless peasants, strangers who could offer her father nothing in return. The soldiers had come in boots, carrying guns, making clear that resistance would mean death. Yet they had spoken the language of fairness and equality, their goal to build a better society for all. Watching, listening, absorbing, Alisa knew one thing for certain: those who invoked such lofty ideals were not to be trusted. Talk about helping others was only a thin cover for force and power. It was a lesson she would never forget.

Ayn Rand's father, Zinovy Rosenbaum, was a self-made man. His bootstrap was a coveted space at Warsaw University, a privilege granted to only a few Jewish students. After earning a degree in chemistry, he established his own business in St. Petersburg. By the time of the Revolution he had ensconced his family in a large apartment on Nevsky Prospekt, a prominent address at the heart of the city. His educated and cultured wife, Anna, came from a wealthy and well-connected background. Her father was an expert tailor favored by the Russian Army, a position that helped shield their extended family against anti-Semitic violence.

Anna and Zinovy elevated Enlightenment European culture over their religious background. They observed the major Jewish holidays, holding a seder each year, but otherwise led largely secular lives. They spoke Russian at home and their three daughters took private lessons in French, German, gymnastics, and piano. They taught their eldest daughter, Alisa, born in 1905, that “culture, civilization, anything which is interesting... is abroad,” and refused to let her read Russian literature.¹

In their urbane sophistication and secularism, the Rosenbaums were vastly different from the majority of Russian Jews, who inhabited shtetls in the Pale of Settlement. Regulated and restricted by the czar in their choice of occupation and residence, Russia’s Jews had found an unsteady berth in the empire until the 1880s, when a series of pogroms and newly restrictive laws touched off a wave of migration. Between 1897 and 1915 over a million Jews left Russia, most heading for the United States. Others emigrated to urban areas, where they had to officially register for residence. St. Petersburg’s Jewish community grew from 6,700 in 1869 to 35,000 in 1910, the year Alisa turned five.²

By any standard, Russian or Jewish, the Rosenbaums were an elite and privileged family. Alisa’s maternal grandparents were so wealthy, the children noted with awe, that when their grandmother needed a tissue she summoned a servant with a button on the wall.³ Alisa and her three sisters grew up with a cook, a governess, a nurse, and tutors. Their mother loved to entertain, and their handsome apartment was filled with relatives and friends drawn to her evening salons. The family spent each summer on the Crimean peninsula, a popular vacation spot for the affluent. When Alisa was nine they journeyed to Austria and Switzerland for six weeks.

Alisa’s childhood was dominated by her volatile mother. At a young age Alisa found herself ensnared in an intense family rivalry between Anna and her sister’s husband. Both families had three daughters and lived in the same apartment building. Her mother was delighted each time Alisa bested her cousins in reading, writing, or arithmetic, and showed her off before gatherings of friends and relatives. Privately she berated her eldest daughter for failing to make friends. Alisa was a lonely, alienated child. In new situations she was quiet and still, staring out remotely through her large dark eyes. Anna grew increasingly frustrated with Alisa’s withdrawn nature. “Why didn’t I like to play with others? Why didn’t I have any

girlfriends? That was kind of the nagging refrain,” Alisa remembered.⁴ At times Anna’s criticisms erupted into full-blown rage. In a “fit of temperament” she would lash out at her children, on one occasion breaking the legs of Alisa’s favorite doll and on another ripping up a prized photo of Alexander Kerensky. She declared openly that she had never wanted children, hated caring for them, and did so only because it was her duty.

Zinovy, a taciturn and passive man, did little to balance his mercurial wife. He worked diligently to support his family and retreated in his spare time to games of whist, a popular card game. Despite the clashes with her mother, Alisa knew she was unquestionably the family favorite. Her grandmother doted on her, showering her with trinkets and treats during each visit. Her younger sisters idolized her, and although her father remained in the background, as was customary for fathers in his time, Alisa sensed that he approved of her many accomplishments.

After extensive tutoring at home, Alisa enrolled in a progressive and academically rigorous gymnasium. During religion classes at her school, the Jewish girls were excused to the back of the room and left to entertain themselves.⁵ What really set Alisa apart was not her religion, but the same aloof temperament her mother found so troubling. Occasionally she would attract the interest of another girl, but she was never able to maintain a steady friendship. Her basic orientation to the world was simply too different. Alisa was serious and stern, uncomfortable with gossip, games, or the intrigues of popularity. “I would be bashful because I literally didn’t know what to talk to people about,” she recalled. Her classmates were a mystery to Alisa, who “didn’t give the right cues apparently.” Her only recourse was her intelligence. Her high marks at school enabled her to gain the respect, if not the affection, of her peers.⁶ Alisa’s perspective on her childhood was summarized in a composition she wrote as a young teen: “childhood is the worst period of one’s life.”

She survived these lonely years by recourse to fantasy, imagining herself akin to Catherine the Great, an outsider in the Russian court who had maneuvered her way to prominence. Like Catherine, Alisa saw herself as “a child of destiny.” “They don’t know it,” she thought, “but it’s up to me to demonstrate it.”⁷ She escaped into the French children’s magazines her mother proffered to help with her language studies. In their pages Alisa discovered stories rife with beautiful princesses, brave adventurers,

and daring warriors. Drawn into an imaginary universe of her own creation she began composing her own dramatic stories, often sitting in the back of her classroom writing instead of attending to the lessons.

Alisa's most enthusiastic audience for these early stories were her two sisters. Nora, the youngest, shared her introversion and artistic inclinations. Her specialty was witty caricatures of her family that blended man and beast. Alisa and Nora were inseparable, calling themselves Dact I and Dact II, after the winged dinosaurs of Arthur Conan Doyle's fantastic adventure story *The Lost World*.⁸ The middle sister, Natasha, a skilled pianist, was outgoing and social. Both Nora and Natasha shared a keen appreciation for their elder sister's creativity, and at bedtime Alisa regaled them with her latest tales.

As the turmoil of Russia's revolutionary years closed in around the Rosenbaums, the family was forced to forgo the luxuries that had marked Alisa's childhood. Trips abroad and summer vacations receded into the distant past. Watching the disintegration of St. Petersburg, now renamed Petrograd, Anna convinced Zinovy they must relocate to Crimea. There, in czarist territory, he was able to open another shop, and the family's situation stabilized briefly. Alisa, entering her teenage years, enrolled at the local school, where her superior city education made her an immediate star.

But Crimea was a short-lived refuge. Red and White Russians battled for control of the region, and the chaos spilled into Yevpatoria, where the Rosenbaums lived. Communist soldiers rampaged through the town, once again robbing Zinovy. Piece by piece the family sold Anna's jewelry. Like a good peasant daughter, Alisa was put to work. She took a job teaching soldiers how to read.

In the middle of these bleak years Alisa unexpectedly broke through to her distant father. The connection was politics. Although forbidden to read the newspapers or talk about politics, she had followed the news of the Revolution with great interest. When Zinovy announced his departure for a political meeting one evening, Alisa boldly asked to accompany him. Surprised yet pleased, Zinovy agreed to take her, and afterward the two had their first real conversation. He listened to Alisa respectfully and offered his own opinions.

Zinovy was an anti-Communist and, as the mature Rand phrased it, "pro-individualist." So was she. In her adventure stories heroic resisters struggling against the Soviet regime now replaced knights and

princesses. She filled her diary with invective against the Communists, further bolstered by her father's position. Their new connection was a source of great joy for Alisa, who remembered it was "only after we began to be political allies that I really felt a real love for him..." She also discovered that her father had an "enormous approval of my intelligence," which further confirmed her emerging sense of self.⁹

As in Petrograd, she remained unpopular with her classmates. They were eager to ask for her help on school assignments, but Alisa was not included in parties or invited on dates. Underneath their rejection Alisa sensed a certain resentment. Did her classmates dislike her because she was smarter? Were they penalizing her for her virtues? It was the first glimmer of an idea that would surface later, in her fiction. "I *think* that is what is the matter with my relationships," she began to believe, but worried this was "too easy" an explanation.¹⁰

Most likely, her classmates simply found Alisa abrasive and argumentative. She had an admitted tendency to force conversations, a violent intensity to her beliefs, an unfortunate inability to stop herself from arguing. But from her perspective, their jealousy had forced her into a lonely exile. Alisa was starting to understand herself as a heroine unfairly punished for what was best in her. Later she would come to see envy and resentment as fundamental social and political problems.

Turning to her interior world, Alisa became concerned not only with *what* she thought but *how* she thought. In her preteen years she had taken her family's casual attitude toward religion a step farther, deciding that she was an atheist. Now she discovered the two corollaries of her unbelief: logic and reason. When a teacher introduced the class to Aristotle and syllogisms it was "as if a light bulb went off." Consistency was the principle that grabbed her attention, not surprising given her unpredictable and frightening life. Consistency as Alisa understood it was the road to truth, the means to prevail in the heated arguments she loved, the one method to determine the validity of her thoughts.¹¹

Three years after leaving Petrograd, in 1921, the Rosenbaums returned. There was nowhere left to go, for Crimea and the rest of the country had fallen to the Communists. Anna had begged Zinovy to

leave Russia, to flee with his family across the Black Sea, but for once he stood firm against her. The decision to return was not wise. Their apartment and adjoining property had been given to other families, although the Rosenbaums were able to secure a few rooms in the building Zinovy had once owned outright.

Years later Alisa described in her fiction the grim disappointment of her family's return to Petrograd: "Their new home had no front entrance. It had no electrical connections; the plumbing was out of order; they had to carry water in pails from the floor below. Yellow stains spread over the ceilings, bearing witness to past rains." All trappings of luxury and higher culture had vanished. Instead of monogrammed silver, spoons were of heavy tin. There was no crystal or silver, and "rusty nails on the walls showed the places where old paintings had hung."¹² At parties hostesses could offer their guests only dubious delicacies, such as potato skin cookies and tea with saccharine tablets instead of sugar.

Under the Soviet New Economic Plan Zinovy was able to briefly reopen his shop with several partners, but it was again confiscated. After this latest insult Zinovy made one last, futile stand: he refused to work. Alisa silently admired her father's principles. To her his abdication was not self-destruction but self-preservation. His refusal to work for an exploitive system would structure the basic premise of her last novel, *Atlas Shrugged*. But with survival at stake it was no time for principles, or for bourgeois propriety. Anna found work teaching languages in a school, becoming her family's main source of support. But her teacher's salary was not enough for a family of five, and starvation stalked the Rosenbaums.

Even with money it would have been difficult to find enough to eat, for 1921–22 was the year of the Russian famine, during which five million Russians starved to death. In the city limited food supplies were parceled out to a subdued population through ration cards. Millet, acorns, and mush became mainstays of the family diet. Anna struggled to cook palatable meals on the Primus, a rudimentary Soviet stove that belched smoke throughout their living area. In later years Alisa remembered these bleak times vividly. She told friends she wrapped newspapers around her feet in lieu of shoes and recalled how she had begged her mother for a last dried pea to stave off her hunger.

Living under such dire circumstances, the Rosenbaums continued to prize education and culture. Alisa, now a full-time university student, was not asked to work. When her parents scraped together enough money to pay her streetcar fare she pocketed the money and used it to buy tickets to the theater. Musicals and operettas replaced fiction as her favorite narcotic.

At Petrograd State University Alisa was immune to the passions of revolutionary politics, inured against any radicalism by the travails her family was enduring. When she matriculated at age sixteen the entire Soviet higher education system was in flux. The Bolsheviks had liberalized admission policies and made tuition free, creating a flood of new students, including women and Jews, whose entrance had previously been restricted. Alisa was among the first class of women admitted to the university. Alongside these freedoms the Bolsheviks dismissed counterrevolutionary professors, harassed those who remained, and instituted Marxist courses on political economy and historical materialism. Students and professors alike protested the new conformity. In her first year Alisa was particularly outspoken. Then the purges began. Anticomunist professors and students disappeared, never to be heard from again. Alisa herself was briefly expelled when all students of bourgeois background were dismissed from the university. (The policy was later reversed and she returned.) Acutely aware of the dangers she faced, Alisa became quiet and careful with her words.

Alisa's education was heavily colored by Marxism. In her later writing she satirized the pabulum students were fed in books like *The ABC of Communism* and *The Spirit of the Collective*. By the time she graduated the school had been renamed Leningrad State University (and Petrograd had become Leningrad). Like the city itself, the university had fallen into disrepair. There were few textbooks or school supplies, and lecture halls and professors' offices were cold enough to freeze ink. Ongoing reorganization and reform meant that departments and graduation requirements were constantly changing. During her three years at the university Alisa gravitated to smaller seminar-style classes, skipping the large lectures that were heavy on Communist ideology. Most of her coursework was in history, but she also enrolled in classes in French, biology, history of worldviews, psychology, and

logic. Her degree was granted by the interdisciplinary Department of Social Pedagogy.¹³

Alisa was skeptical of the education she received at the university, and it appears to have influenced her primarily in its form rather than its content. Her time at the University of Leningrad taught her that all ideas had an ultimate political valence. Communist authorities scrutinized every professor and course for counterrevolutionary ideas. The most innocuous statement could be traced back to its roots and identified as being either for or against the Soviet system. Even history, a subject Alisa chose because it was relatively free of Marxism, could be twisted and framed to reflect the glories of Bolshevism. Years later she considered herself an authority on propaganda, based on her university experience. “I was trained in it by experts,” she explained to a friend.¹⁴

The university also shaped Alisa’s understanding of intellectual life, primarily by exposing her to formal philosophy. Russian philosophy was synoptic and systemic, an approach that may have stimulated her later interest in creating an integrated philosophical system.¹⁵ In her classes she heard about Plato and Herbert Spencer and studied the works of Aristotle for the first time. There was also a strong Russian tradition of pursuing philosophical inquiry outside university settings, and that was how she encountered Friedrich Nietzsche, the philosopher who quickly became her favorite. A cousin taunted her with a book by Nietzsche, “who beat you to all your ideas.”¹⁶ Reading outside of her classes she devoured his works.

Alisa’s first love when she left university was not philosophy, however, but the silver screen. The Russian movie industry, long dormant during the chaos of war and revolution, began to revive in the early 1920s. Under the New Economic Plan Soviet authorities allowed the import of foreign films and the Commissariat of Education began supporting Russian film production. Hoping to become a screenwriter, Alisa enrolled in the new State Institute for Cinematography after receiving her undergraduate degree. Movies became her obsession. In 1924 she viewed forty-seven movies; the next year she watched 117. In a movie diary she ranked each film she saw on a scale of one to five, noted its major stars, and started a list of her favorite artists. The movies even inspired her first published works, a pamphlet about the actress Pola Negri and a booklet titled *Hollywood: American Movie City*. In these

early works she wrote knowledgeably about major directors, artists, and films and explained the studio system, the way directors worked, even the use of specially trained animals.¹⁷

In the movies Alisa glimpsed America: an ideal world, a place as different from Russia as she could imagine. America had glamour, excitement, romance, a lush banquet of material goods. She described Hollywood in reverent tones: "People, for whom 24 hours is not enough time in a day, stream in a constant wave over its boulevards, smooth as marble. It is difficult for them to talk with one another, because the noise of automobiles drowns out their voices. Shining, elegant Fords and Rolls-Royce's fly, flickering, as the frames of one continuous movie reel. And the sun strikes the blazing windows of enormous, snow white studios. Every night an electric glow rises over the city."¹⁸

Her interest in America surged when the family received an unexpected letter from Chicago. Almost thirty years earlier Harry Portnoy, one of Anna's relatives, had emigrated to America, and her family had helped pay the passage. Now one of Harry's children, Sara Lipski, wrote inquiring about the Rosenbaums, for they had heard nothing during the wartime years. Alisa saw her chance. Using her connections to the Portnoys she could obtain a visa to visit the United States; once there she could find a way to stay forever. She begged her mother to ask their relatives for help. Her parents agreed to the idea, perhaps worried that their outspoken daughter would never survive in the shifting political climate.

Or perhaps they agreed because Alisa's unhappiness was palpable. Amid the privations of Petrograd she had made a life for herself, even attracting an attentive suitor, a neighbor her family referred to as Seriozha. But daily life continually disappointed. Film school seemed a road to nowhere, for Alisa knew that as a Russian screenwriter she would be expected to write Soviet propaganda, to support a system she loathed. Seriozha was little comfort. The two had met when their families rented adjacent cabins one summer for a brief vacation. Back in Leningrad Alisa continued to accept his overtures, but her heart lay with the memory of another man. Her first adolescent crush had been on the darkly attractive Lev, whom she met through a cousin. Years later his memory lingered as the character Leo in *We the Living*: "He was tall; his collar was raised; a cap was pulled over his eyes. His mouth, calm, severe,

contemptuous, was that of an ancient chieftain who could order men to die, and his eyes were such as could watch it.”¹⁹ Fascinated by the intense young Alisa, Lev for a time became a regular visitor to the Rosenbaum household. But he had no genuine interest in a romance, soon abandoning her for other pursuits. Alisa was crushed. Lev symbolized all the lost possibility of her life in Russia.

As she listened to her beloved eldest daughter shouting with despair behind her bedroom door, Anna knew she must get Alisa out of Russia.²⁰ It took months to lay the groundwork. The first step was English lessons. Next Anna, Natasha, and Nora began a new round of fervent Communist activity intended to prove the family’s loyalty to the Revolution, even as Anna began securing the permits for Alisa’s escape. The Rosenbaums claimed that Alisa intended to study American movies and return to help launch the Russian film industry, a lie made plausible by her enrollment at the film institute and the fact that her relatives owned a theater. All of Anna’s Chicago relatives, the Portnoy, Lipski, Satrin, and Goldberg families, pledged their support.

Alisa’s impending departure made the entire family tense. At each bureaucratic hurdle Alisa was struck with panic attacks at the prospect that she might not escape. Even as they urged her to use any means necessary to stay in the United States, the Rosenbaums were devastated by her departure. Alisa appeared more sanguine. Going to America was like “going to Mars,” and she knew she might never see her family again. Yet she was supremely confident about her own prospects, and also shared her father’s sense that the Communist government could not last. “I’ll be famous by the time I return,” she shouted to her stricken family as the train pulled out of the Leningrad station in January 1926. Aside from the lovelorn Seriozha, who would accompany her as far as Moscow, Alisa was on her own. She carried with her seventeen film scenarios and a precious stone sewn into her clothes by Anna. Nora, Natasha, and her cousins chased after the train as it faded into the distance. Zinovy returned home and wept.²¹

Leaving Russia was only the first step, for Alisa still had to receive immigration papers from the American consulate in neighboring Latvia. Just a year earlier, responding to rising nativist sentiment, the U.S. Congress had moved to severely restrict immigration from Russia

and other Eastern European countries. As she waited for her appointment, staying with family friends, Alisa soothed her nerves at the cinema, seeing four films during her brief stay. A quick fib about a fiancé secured her the necessary American papers, and then she was off, taking a train through Berlin and Paris, where more family connections smoothed her way. At the Hague she sent a last cable to Leningrad and then took passage on an ocean liner bound for New York. Once there, she would be met by yet more family friends, who would shepherd her to Chicago.

Onboard the *de Grasse* Alisa was flattened by seasickness. But as she lay pinned to her berth by the motion of the sea she began refashioning herself. In Russia she had experimented with using a different surname, Rand, an abbreviation of Rosenbaum. Now she jettisoned Alisa for a given name inspired by a Finnish writer.²² Like a Hollywood star she wanted a new, streamlined name that would be memorable on the marquee. The one she ultimately chose, Ayn Rand, freed her from her gender, her religion, her past. It was the perfect name for a child of destiny.

The rat-tat-tat of Ayn's typewriter drove her Chicago relatives crazy. She wrote every night, sometimes all night. In America nothing was going to stand in her way. Whenever possible she went to the Lipskis' cinema, watching films repeatedly, soaking in the details of the filming, the acting, the story, the plot. In the six months she spent in Chicago she saw 135 movies. Her English was still poor, and matching the subtitles to the action helped her learn.

Completely focused on her own concerns, Rand had little time for chit-chat with her relatives. Asked about family affairs in Russia she gave curt answers or launched into long tirades about the murderous Bolsheviks. The many generations of Portnoys were baffled by their strange new relative. They began trading her back and forth, for no household could long stand her eccentricities. By the end of the summer their patience was exhausted.

Rand was eager to leave Chicago anyway. She was particularly discomfited by the exclusively Jewish social world in which her relatives lived. Since her arrival in New York, nearly everyone she had met was Jewish. This was not, she thought, the real America. She longed to break

out of the stifling ethnic enclave of her extended family and experience the country she had imagined so vividly in Russia. The Portnoys bought her train ticket to Hollywood and gave her a hundred dollars to start out. Rand promised them a Rolls Royce in return.²³

In Russia Rand had imagined Hollywood as a microcosm of the globe: “You will meet representatives of every nationality, people from every social class. Elegant Europeans, energetic, businesslike Americans, benevolent Negroes, quiet Chinese, savages from colonies. Professors from the best schools, farmers, and aristocrats of all types and ages descend on the Hollywood studios in a greedy crowd.”²⁴ Despite its international image, Hollywood itself was little more than a glorified cow town that could not compare to the glitz of its productions. When Rand arrived in 1926 the major studios were just setting up shop, drawn by the social freedoms of California and the warm climate, which meant films could be shot year-round. Roads were haphazard and might dead-end suddenly into a thicket of brush; chaparral covered the rolling hills to the east, where rattlesnakes and mountain lions sheltered. Besides movies, the main exports were the oranges and lemons that grew in groves at the edge of town. Near the studios a surreal mix of costumed extras wandered the streets. “A mining town in lotus land” is the way the novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald described early Hollywood. More negative was the verdict of his contemporary Nathanael West, who called the city “a dream dump.”²⁵ But Rand had little exposure to the movie industry’s dark side.

Instead, arriving in Hollywood was like stepping into one of the fantasy tales she wrote as a child. Her timing was fortuitous. The industry was still young and relatively fluid; moreover, the mid-1920s were the last years of the silent pictures, so even though Rand had barely mastered English she could still hope to author screenplays. Movie dialogue, which appeared in subtitles at the bottom of the screen, was necessarily brief and basic. The action in movies was driven instead by popular piano music, which Rand loved. In Chicago she had written several more screenplays in her broken English.

Her first stop was the De Mille Studio, home of her favorite director. None of De Mille’s religious films had been released in Russia, where he was famous for “society glamour, sex, and adventure,” as Rand recalled.²⁶ She had a formulaic letter of introduction from the Portnoys

and a sheaf of her work in hand. A secretary listened politely to her tale before shunting her out the door. And then she saw him, Cecil B. De Mille himself. By the gates of the studio De Mille was idling his automobile, engrossed in conversation. She stared and stared. De Mille, used to adulation, was struck by the intensity of her gaze and called out to her from his open roadster. Rand stammered back in her guttural accent, telling him she had just arrived from Russia. De Mille knew a good story when he heard it and impulsively invited Rand into his car. He drove her through the streets of Hollywood, dropped famous names, pointed out noteworthy places, and invited her to the set of *King of Kings* the next day. When it was all over Rand had a nickname, “Caviar,” and steady work as an extra.

She quickly parlayed her personal connection with De Mille into a job as a junior writer in his studio. Her own screenwriting efforts were unpolished, but Rand could tell a good movie from a bad one. By the time she arrived in Hollywood she had watched and ranked more than three hundred movies. As a junior writer she summarized properties De Mille owned and wrote suggestions for improvement. It was almost too good to be true. Less than a year after leaving Russia, Rand had realized some of her wildest dreams. She took lodgings at the new Studio Club, a charitable home for eighty aspiring actresses located in a beautiful, Mediterranean-style building designed by Julia Morgan. Founded by concerned Hollywood matrons, the Studio Club aimed to keep the starstruck “extra girl” out of trouble by providing safe, affordable, and supervised refuge. Men were not allowed into the rooms, and the residents were provided with a variety of wholesome social activities, such as weekly teas.

These aspects of the Studio Club held little attraction for Rand, who struck her fellow boarders as an oddball. In contrast to the would-be starlets who surrounded her, Rand rarely wore makeup and cut her own hair, favoring a short pageboy style. She stayed up all night to write and loved combative arguments about abstract topics. “My first impression is that this woman is a freak!” remembered a Hollywood acquaintance. Rand herself knew she was different. “Try to be calm, balanced, indifferent, normal, and not enthusiastic, passionate, excited, ecstatic, flaming, tense,” she counseled herself in her journal. “Learn to be calm, for goodness sake!”²⁷

Even in a town of outsize ambitions Rand was extraordinarily driven. She lashed at herself in a writing diary, “Stop admiring yourself—you are nothing yet.” Her steady intellectual companion in these years was Friedrich Nietzsche, and the first book she bought in English was *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Nietzsche was an individualist who celebrated self-creation, which was after all what Rand was doing in America. She seemed to have been deeply affected by his emphasis on the will to power, or self-overcoming. She commanded herself, “The secret of life: you must be nothing but will. Know what you want and do it. Know what you are doing and why you are doing it, every minute of the day. All will and all control. Send everything else to hell!”²⁸ Set on perfecting her English, she checked out British and American literature from the library. She experimented with a range of genres in her writing, creating short stories, screenplays, and scenarios. She brought her best efforts into the De Mille studio, but none were accepted.

Rand was also absorbed by the conundrums of love, sex, and men. Shortly after arriving in Chicago she had written Seriozha to end their relationship. Her mother applauded the move, telling her daughter it was “only the fact that you had been surrounded by people from the caveman days that made you devote so much time to him.” She was less understanding when Rand began to let ties to her family lapse. “You left, and it is though you divorced us,” Anna wrote accusingly when Rand did not respond to letters for several months.²⁹ Rand was becoming increasingly wary of dependence of any kind. The prospect of romance in particular roused the pain of Lev’s rejection years earlier. To desire was to need, and Rand wanted to need nobody.

Instead she created a fictional world where beautiful, glamorous, and rich heroines dominated their suitors. Several short stories she wrote in Hollywood, but never published, dwelled on the same theme. *The Husband I Bought* stars an heiress who rescues her boyfriend from bankruptcy by marrying him. Another heiress in *Good Copy* saves the career of her newspaper boyfriend, again by marrying him, while in *Escort* a woman inadvertently purchases the services of her husband for an evening on the town. In several stories the woman not only has financial power over the man, but acts to sexually humiliate and emasculate him by having a public extramarital affair. In Rand’s imagination women were passionate yet remained firmly in control.³⁰

Real life was not so simple. On a streetcar heading to work during her first days in Hollywood she noticed a tall and striking stranger. Frank O'Connor was exactly the type of man Rand found most attractive. To her joy, she realized they were both heading to the same destination, De Mille's *King of Kings* set. After changing into her costume she spotted him again, attired as a Roman soldier, complete with toga and head-dress. Rand followed his every move for days. On the fourth day she deliberately tripped him as he did a scene and apologized profusely after he fell. Her words made it clear she was not American, and like De Mille before him, Frank was struck by this odd foreign woman. They chatted briefly. Nerves thickened Rand's accent, and Frank could barely understand a word she said. Then he was distracted by someone else, and the next minute he was gone.

Never one to doubt herself, Rand was sure it was love. Finding Frank and then losing him shattered her. Homesickness, loneliness, anxiety over her future—all her pent-up emotions poured forth as she fixated on the handsome stranger. For months she sobbed audibly in her bedroom at the Studio Club, alarming the other girls. Then she found him again, this time in a library off Hollywood Boulevard. They spoke for several hours, and he invited her to dinner. From then on their courtship was slow but steady.

Raised in a small town in Ohio, Frank was the third of seven children born to devout Catholic parents. His father was a steelworker, his mother a housewife who aspired to greater things. Overbearing and ambitious, she dominated her large brood and her passive, alcoholic husband. After his mother's untimely death, Frank left home at age fifteen with three of his brothers. They worked their way to New York, where Frank began acting in the fledgling movie industry. A few years later he followed the studios west, arriving in Hollywood around the same time as Rand. Like her, he was entranced by the flash and sophistication of the movies.

The similarities ended there. Where Ayn was outspoken and bold, Frank was taciturn and retiring. She was mercurial, stubborn, and driven; he was even-keeled, irenic, and accommodating. Most important, Frank was used to strong women. He was intrigued by Ayn's strong opinions and intellectual bent and was willing to let her steer the relationship. Rand was captivated, both by Frank's gentle manner and by his good looks. She worshipped the beauties of Hollywood, but with her square

jaw and thick features she knew she could never be counted among them. Frank, however, was movie-star handsome, with a slender build, an easy grace, and a striking visage. Her neighbors at the Studio Club began to notice a new Ayn, one more relaxed, friendly, and social than before. An incident the other girls found hilarious sheds some light on her priorities. “She apparently had terrible financial problems and owed money to the club,” recounted a fellow boarder. “Anyhow, a woman was going to donate \$50 to the neediest girl in the club, and Miss Williams picked out Ayn. Ayn thanked them for the money and then went right out and bought a set of black lingerie.”³¹

Rand’s financial problems were triggered by the advent of the talkies, which shook the movie industry to the core. In 1927 De Mille closed his studio, and with talking pictures now ascendant Rand could not find another job in the industry. Unskilled and anonymous, she had to settle for a series of odd jobs and temporary positions. She fell behind on her rent and started skipping meals. This was not the fate she had expected when she disembarked in New York years earlier. Though she accepted small loans from her family, she was unwilling to ask Frank for help, or even to reveal the extent of her problems to him. On their dates she kept up appearances, never letting him see the despair that was beginning to suffuse her life.

Under the surface Rand’s unfulfilled ambitions ate away at her. When the tabloids filled with the sensational case of William Hickman, a teen murderer who mutilated his victim and boasted maniacally of his deed when caught, Rand was sympathetic rather than horrified. To her, Hickman embodied the strong individual breaking free from the ordinary run of humanity. She imagined Hickman to be like herself, a sensitive individual ruined by misunderstanding and neglect, writing in her diary, “If he had any desires and ambitions—what was the way before him? A long, slow, soul-eating, heart-wrecking toil and struggle; the degrading, ignoble road of silent pain and loud compromises.”³² Glossing over his crime, Rand focused on his defiant refusal to express remorse or contrition.

She began to plan “The Little Street,” a story with a protagonist, Danny Renahan, modeled after Hickman. It was the first of her stories to contain an explicit abstract theme. She wanted to document and decry how society crushed exceptional individuals. In a writing notebook she explained her attraction to the scandal: “It is more exact to say that the model is not

Hickman, but what Hickman suggested to me.” Still, Rand had trouble interpreting the case as anything other than an exercise in mob psychology. She wrote, “This case is not moral indignation at a terrible crime. It is the mob’s murderous desire to revenge its hurt vanity against the man who dared to be alone.” What the tabloids saw as psychopathic, Rand admired: “It is the amazing picture of a man with no regard whatever for all that society holds sacred, and with a consciousness all his own. A man who really stands alone, in action and in soul.”³³

Rand appeared to be drawing from both her own psychology and her recent readings of Nietzsche as she mused about the case and planned her story. She modeled Renahan along explicitly Nietzschean lines, noting that “he has the true, innate psychology of a Superman.” To Rand a Superman was one who cared nothing for the thoughts, feelings, or opinions of others. Her description of Renahan as Superman echoed her own self-description as a child: “He is born with a wonderful, free, light consciousness—resulting from the absolute lack of social instinct or herd feeling. He does not understand, *because he has no organ for understanding*, the necessity, meaning or importance of other people.”³⁴

Rand’s understanding of the Superman as a strong individual who places himself above society was a popular, if crude, interpretation of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*.³⁵ What stands out is her emphasis on Renahan’s icy emotional alienation. Rand clearly admired her imaginary hero’s solipsism, yet she had chosen a profession that measured success by popularity. The tension between her values and her goals produced an ugly frustration. “Show that humanity is petty. That it’s small. That it’s dumb, with the heavy, hopeless stupidity of a man born feeble-minded,” she wrote.³⁶ This anger and frustration, born from her professional struggles, was itself the greatest obstacle to Rand’s writing career.

Rand’s bitterness was undoubtedly nurtured by her interest in Nietzsche. Judging from her journals, unemployment precipitated a new round of reading his work. Her notes filled with the phrases “Nietzsche and I think” and “as Nietzsche said.” Her style also edged in his direction as she experimented with pithy aphorisms and observations. More significantly, Nietzsche’s elitism fortified her own. Like many of his readers, Rand seems never to have doubted that she was one of the creators, the artists, the potential Overmen of whom Nietzsche spoke.³⁷

On some level Rand realized that her infatuation with Nietzsche, however inspirational, was damaging to her creativity. The idea of the Superman had lodged in her mind with problematic force. She struggled to resist: “Try to forget yourself—to forget all high ideas, ambitions, superman and so on. Try to put yourself into the psychology of ordinary people, when you think of stories.”³⁸ Convinced of her own worth yet stymied by her low position, Rand alternated between despair and mania.

When she began writing to her family again after a long lapse, Anna was shocked at the dark tone that had crept into her letters. She sensed that Rand’s expectations were part of the problem, reminding her daughter that success would not come without a struggle: “Your talent is very clearly and firmly established. Your gift manifested itself very early in life and long ago. Your talent is so clear that eventually it will break through and spurt like a fountain.”³⁹ As her mother intuited, Rand’s silence was due in part to her fear of disappointing her family. They had pinned their hopes on her, and after such a promising start Rand had little to report.

She did, however, have one success to share: a new husband. After a year of regular dates Rand moved out of the Studio Club into a furnished room that afforded her and Frank more privacy. Soon she began pushing for marriage, reminding Frank that after several extensions her visa was soon to expire. They were married in 1929, the year of the Great Crash. A few months later Rand applied for citizenship as Mrs. Frank O’Connor.

As it turned out, Rand’s stories about dashing heiresses and feckless suitors proved a useful meditation for her marriage to Frank. A struggling actor, he had always worked episodically and the economic depression made jobs even more difficult to find. Rand was the breadwinner from the start. Soon after their marriage she was hired as a filing clerk in the wardrobe department at RKO Radio Pictures after another Russian employed there had given her a lead on the job. Focused, organized, and desperate for work, Rand was an ideal employee. Within a year she had risen to head of the department and was earning a comfortable salary, which allowed the newlyweds to establish a stable life together. They owned a collie and an automobile and lived in an apartment large enough to accommodate long-term guests. When close friends of the

O'Connor family went through a wrenching divorce, Ayn and Frank sheltered Frank's ten-year-old goddaughter for a summer.

Through the mundane negotiations of married life a current of exoticism kept their attraction strong. In a letter home Rand described Frank as an "Irishman with blue eyes," and he took to wearing Russian Cossack-style shirts.⁴⁰ Still, Rand found the rhythms of domesticity exhausting. She rose early in the morning to write and then left for RKO, where her days could stretch to sixteen hours. Each night she rushed home to cook Frank dinner, a responsibility she prized as a sign of wifely virtue. Over Frank's protestations she insisted on boiling water to scald the dishes after every meal, having inherited her mother's phobia about germs. After dinner and cleanup she returned to her writing.

In her off-hours she completed a film scenario called *Red Pawn*, a melodramatic love story set in Soviet Russia. A well-connected neighbor passed the scenario along to an agent, and Rand used her RKO position to access unofficial channels. She sent her work to a Universal screenwriter, Gouverneur Morris, a writer of pulpy novels and magazine stories (and great-grandson of the colonial statesman). The two had never met, but Morris's tightly plotted work had impressed Rand. Morris groaned at the request from an unknown wardrobe girl, but to his surprise he enjoyed the story. Meeting Rand he pronounced her a genius. When Universal purchased *Red Pawn* in 1932 Morris claimed full credit, and he pressed the studio to hire her on as a writer. Universal paid Rand seven hundred dollars for her story and an additional eight hundred dollars for an eight-week contract to write a screenplay and treatment.⁴¹

Rand's luck was beginning to turn. *Red Pawn* was never produced, but a few prominent stars showed interest in the property, sparking a brief flurry of news coverage. "Russian Girl Finds End of Rainbow in Hollywood" was the *Chicago Daily News* headline to a short article that mentioned Rand's Chicago connections, her meeting with De Mille, and plans for the movie.⁴² The screenwriting job was far more lucrative than working in the wardrobe department, and by the end of the year Rand was flush enough to quit work and begin writing full time. The next two years were her most productive yet. In 1933 she completed a play, *Night of January 16th*, and the next year finished her first novel, *We the Living*.

As she began writing seriously, Rand was not shy about drawing from the work of other authors. Copying was one of the few honored traditions in Hollywood; no sooner had one studio released a popular movie than the others would rush a similar story into production. Similarly, Rand was inspired to write a play set in a courtroom after seeing *The Trial of Mary Dugan*. When her play *Night of January 16th* was first produced the *Los Angeles Times* noted uneasily, “It so closely resembles ‘The Trial of Mary Dugan’ in its broader aspects as to incorporate veritably the same plot.”⁴³

It is safe to say, however, that the author of *Mary Dugan* was not trying to advance individualism through theater. That goal was Rand’s alone. *Night of January 16th* was Rand’s first successful marriage of entertainment and propaganda. She hoped to both entertain her audience and spread her ideas about individualism. Like “The Little Street,” the play was heavily tintured with her interpretation of Nietzsche. She drew on yet another highly publicized criminal case to shape one of her characters, Bjorn Faulkner, who was loosely modeled on the infamous “Swedish Match King” Ivar Kreuger. In 1932 Kreuger shot himself when his financial empire, in reality a giant Ponzi scheme, collapsed in scandal.

Rand still found criminality an irresistible metaphor for individualism, with dubious results. Translated by Rand into fiction, Nietzsche’s transvaluation of values changed criminals into heroes and rape into love. Rand intended Bjorn Faulkner to embody heroic individualism, but in the play he comes off as little more than an unscrupulous businessman with a taste for rough sex. He rapes his secretary, Karen Andre, on her first day of work. Andre immediately falls in love with him and remains willingly as his mistress, secretary, and eventual business partner. When Faulkner dies under mysterious circumstances, Andre becomes the prime suspect. She goes on trial for Faulkner’s murder, and the entire play is set in a courtroom. What really made *Night of January 16th* was a crowd-pleasing gimmick: each night a different jury is selected from the audience. Rand constructed the play so that there was approximately equal evidence indicting two characters and wrote two endings to the play, to be performed according to the verdict of the audience jury.

This unusual staging attracted the attention of Al Woods, a seasoned producer who wanted to take the play to Broadway. It was the big break

she had been waiting for, but Rand was wary of Woods. As much as she wanted fame, she wanted it on her own terms. *Night of January 16th* was encoded with subtle messages about individualism and morality. The ambitious and unconventional Karen Andre was a softer version of Danny Renahan from “The Little Street.” If the audience shared Rand’s individualistic inclinations they would vote to acquit Andre of the crime. Rand feared that Woods, intent on a hit, would gut the play of its larger meaning. She turned down his offer.

Even as literary fame lay within reach, Rand’s ambitions were racing onward. In early 1934 she began a philosophical journal. She would write in it only episodically in the next few years, accumulating about ten pages before she shifted her focus back to fiction. It was only “the vague beginnings of an amateur philosopher,” she announced modestly, but by the end of her first entry she had decided, “I want to be known as the greatest champion of reason and the greatest enemy of religion.”⁴⁴ She recorded two objections to religion: it established unrealizable, abstract ethical ideas that made men cynical when they fell short, and its emphasis on faith denied reason.

From these first deliberations Rand segued to a series of musings about the relationship between feelings and thoughts. She wondered, “Are instincts and emotions necessarily beyond the control of plain thinking? Or were they trained to be? Why is a complete harmony between mind and emotions impossible?” During her first spell of unemployment Rand had chastised herself for being too emotional. Now she seemed to be convincing herself that emotions could be controlled, if only she could think the right thoughts. Couldn’t contradictory emotions, she ventured, be considered “a form of undeveloped reason, a form of stupidity?”⁴⁵

Over the next few months Rand’s commitment to reason deepened. Where before she had seen herself as moody and excitable, she now imagined, “my instincts and reason are so inseparably one, with the reason ruling the instincts.” Her tone alternated between grandiosity and self-doubt. “Am I trying to impose my own peculiarities as a philosophical system?” she wondered. Still she had no doubt that her musings would eventually culminate in “a logical system, proceeding from

a few axioms in a succession of logical theorems.” “The end result,” she declared, “will be my ‘mathematics of philosophy.’”⁴⁶

She also began responding to Nietzsche’s call for a new, naturalistic morality that would transcend Christianity. The key to originality, she thought, would be to focus exclusively on the individual. “Is ethics necessarily and basically a social conception?” she asked in her journal. “Have there been systems of ethics written primarily on the basis of an individual? Can that be done?” She ended with a Nietzschean peroration: “If men are the highest of animals, isn’t *man* the next step?” Tentatively, slowly, Rand was sketching out the foundations of her later thought.⁴⁷

In the meantime her playwriting career was beginning to take off. Rejecting Woods was an audacious move that only heightened his interest in *Night of January 16th*. After the play was successfully produced by a local Hollywood theater Woods tried again. This time he agreed to small changes in the contract that gave Rand more influence. He also requested that Rand relocate to New York immediately to assist with production of the play. Setting aside her misgivings, Rand accepted Wood’s new offer. She was more than happy to move to New York. Hollywood had never been to her liking, but the few brief days she spent in New York had left a lasting impression. There was little keeping the O’Connors in California, for Frank’s acting career had sputtered to an effective end. In November 1934 they packed up their few possessions and set out on the long drive to New York.

By the time they arrived the young couple was nearly destitute. Rand had drained her savings to write and spent the last of her money on the move. Woods was unable to find funding for the play, so for the foreseeable future Rand would receive only minimal monthly payments. A small furnished room was all they could afford. They borrowed money from a few friends, and Frank’s brother Nick, a bachelor, became a frequent dinner guest and helped contribute to their expenses.

As in Hollywood, they socialized infrequently. Rand detested small talk, often sitting mute at social gatherings. At parties Frank would surreptitiously hand her notes suggesting conversational topics and partners.⁴⁸ She became animated only when the talk moved on to territory where she could hang an argument. At any mention of religion, morality, or ethics she would transform from a silent wallflower into a raging

tigress, eager to take all comers. Neither persona made for pleasant company. But Nick O'Connor, who had a taste for intellectual discussion, enjoyed spending time with Rand. A few other friends gravitated into the O'Connor orbit, including Albert Mannheimer, a young socialist with whom Rand loved to argue, and a few Russians Rand had met through family connections. Frank's niece Mimi Sutton was also a frequent visitor to their home. By and large, though, Rand contented herself with the attentions of a few close friends. She and Frank, or "Cubbyhole" and "Fluff" as they now called one another, drew closer. Though he never pretended to be an intellectual, Frank cultivated a dry wit that she found hilarious. Serious and focused in her professional life, Rand could be silly and girlish with Frank. A long-haired Persian cat, Tartallia, rounded out the family.

As she waited for the play to go up, Rand turned her attention to selling her novel, completed a year before. *We the Living* is the most autobiographical of Rand's works. It is set in a milieu she knew well, the world of the Russian cultured classes who had lost nearly everything in the Revolution. The novel follows the fate of two bourgeois families, the Argounovs and the Ivanovitches, who, like the Rosenbaums, tumble from an exalted position in society to a life of poverty. The main characters are Kira, Leo, and Andrei, three young people who struggle against the injustices and violence of the Soviet regime. Petrograd itself is a palpable presence in the novel. Her tone elegiac and wistful, Rand describes its streets and monuments with evocative detail.

Rand's anti-Communism is woven into every scene in the novel and its overall structure. Kira, the heroine, is an independent and determined career woman who boldly flouts social convention, sharing an apartment with her lover, Leo, the son of a famous general executed for counterrevolutionary activity. Due to their class background, Leo and Kira are expelled from university and are unable to find work because they do not belong to the Communist Party. When Leo falls ill with tuberculosis he is denied medical care for the same reason. "Why—in the face of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics—can't one aristocrat die?" an official asks Kira.⁴⁹ In desperation Kira begins a clandestine affair with Andrei, a sexy Communist with connections to the secret police. Andrei passes his salary on to Kira, who uses it to fund Leo's stay in a sanatorium.

Rand's sympathetic portrait of Andrei is striking, particularly when contrasted to her later villains. For all Rand's hatred of Communism, Andrei is one of her most fully realized and compelling characters. Ruthless in pursuit of his ideals, he has the strength and wisdom to recognize the corruption inherent in the Communist system. In one of the book's most gripping scenes, Andrei raids Leo's apartment and discovers his connection to Kira. When Kira confesses that money was a primary motivation for her affair with him, Andrei is devastated. She is unapologetic: "If you taught us that our life is nothing before that of the State—well then, are you really suffering?" Stung by her words, Andrei begins to understand the consequences of his ideals in action. He is further disillusioned when his superiors prosecute Leo for speculation yet hush up the involvement of several Communist Party members in the scheme. At his next Party Club meeting Andrei denounces the Party and defends individualism. Soon afterward he commits suicide, an act Rand frames as the final, noble decision of a man who recognizes the evil of the system he has served yet refuses to let it poison his soul.⁵⁰

The novel ends on an even bleaker note. Kira has saved Leo's life but not his spirit. Denied gainful employment, he turns to crime and then abandons Kira for a wealthy older woman. Kira concludes, "It was I against a hundred and fifty million people. I lost." At the end of the story Kira is shot while attempting to cross the Siberian border to freedom. Rand paints her death in dramatic detail: "She lay on the edge of a hill and looked down at the sky. One hand, white and still, hung over the edge, and little red drops rolled slowly in the snow, down the slope." Through all the romantic intrigue Rand's didactic message is clear: Communism is a cruel system that crushes the virtuous and rewards the corrupt.⁵¹

We the Living was Rand's first attempt to link her *idée fixe* of individualism to larger social and political problems. It exhibits much of her previous contempt for the masses, but its overall theme has a gravity and relevance missing from her earlier work. In her notes for the novel she used the word "collectivism" for the first time; her book would demonstrate "its spirit, influence, ramifications," she jotted in a brief aside. Rand's use of the concept demonstrated her new familiarity with contemporary American language. As the country sank deeper into depression during the mid-1930s there was much discussion of collective solutions

and collective action.⁵² Like many others, Rand saw Russia as emblematic of collectivism. This identification lay at the heart of her attack.

According to Rand, collectivism was inherently problematic, for it prioritized the common good over the lives of individuals. Russia, with its purges, secret police, and stolen property, provided the clearest example of this truth. But she wanted her novel to show that the problem went beyond Russia, for it was the very principles of Communism, not just the practice, that were flawed. Rand was unwilling to grant collectivism any moral high ground. As Kira informs Andrei, “I loathe your ideals.”⁵³ This was the first germ of Rand’s critique of altruism. It also marked an important expansion and maturation of her thought. Her first works had focused on the clash between exceptional individuals and their immediate society. Now she began to examine how these forces played out on a larger canvas.

This move to a social framework transformed Rand’s writing. In Soviet Russia she found a setting that could give full and plausible expression to her own embedded emotional patterns. When set within an oppressive society, the lonely, embattled individual became not an antisocial loner but an admirable freedom fighter. Drawing from her past also helped Rand check her wilder flights of imagination. The novel’s plot is fanciful, but most of the book’s characters ring true. Rand based many of them on people she knew in Russia and drew liberally from her own experiences to describe the frustration and angst of living under Soviet Communism.⁵⁴

Rand expected the novel to sell quickly. She knew it was not the best work she could produce, but it was far better than anything she had written before. She also had some powerful connections on her side. Her Hollywood booster, Gouverneur Morris, called her latest work “the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of Soviet Russia” and sent the manuscript to his friend H. L. Mencken, the famed book critic. Like Rand, Mencken had a strong appreciation for Nietzsche. An unabashed elitist, he delighted in mocking the stupidity and pretensions of the American “boo-boisie.” With time Mencken was growing increasingly conservative politically, and he proved receptive to Rand’s individualist message. He reported back to Morris that *We the Living* was “a really excellent piece of work,” and the two of them lent their names to Rand’s manuscript. Even so, Rand’s agent reported one failure after another.⁵⁵

It began to dawn on Rand that there were Communist sympathizers, or “pinks,” in America. At first she had assumed, “[T]hey did not matter in the least...this was *the* capitalist country of the world, and by everything I could observe, Leftism or socialism was not an issue.”⁵⁶ But now she began to hear that although publishers liked the book, they found its politics objectionable. Reviewers and editorial board members explained to Rand’s agent that she was simply wrong about Soviet Russia and misunderstood the noble experiment being conducted there. Some added that though conditions might have been poor in the revolutionary period that Rand described, everything was different now.⁵⁷

It is true that *We the Living* flew in the face of everything most educated Americans thought they knew about Russia. As the Great Depression ground on and unemployment soared, intellectuals began unfavorably comparing their faltering capitalist economy to Russian Communism. Karl Marx had predicted that capitalism would fall under the weight of its own contradictions, and now with the economic crisis gripping the West, his predictions seem to be coming true. By contrast Russia seemed an emblematic modern nation, making the staggering leap from a feudal past to an industrial future with ease.⁵⁸

High-profile visitors to Russia reinforced this perception. Important Americans who visited the USSR were given the red carpet treatment and credulously reported back the fantasy they had been fed. More than ten years after the Revolution, Communism was finally reaching full flower, according to the *New York Times* reporter Walter Duranty, a Stalin fan who vigorously debunked accounts of the Ukraine famine, a man-made disaster that would leave millions dead. The Soviet economy was booming; Russia had even eliminated juvenile delinquency, prostitution, and mental illness, according to the psychiatrist Frankwood Williams, author of the optimistic *Russia, Youth, and the Present-Day World*.⁵⁹

There was a sense of inevitability about it all. In educated, reform-minded circles it became conventional wisdom that the United States would simply have to move toward Communism or, at the very least, socialism. Whittaker Chambers, a Communist since the 1920s, remembered the Party’s sudden surge in popularity: “These were the first quotas of the great drift from Columbia, Harvard, and elsewhere...from 1930 on, a small intellectual army passed over to the Communist Party with

scarcely any effort on its part.” Many who did not join remained sympathetic fellow travelers. During the Popular Front period of 1935–39, when the Communist Party encouraged an alliance with the American left, well-meaning liberals flocked to myriad antifascist, pro-labor front organizations. Far more than just a political party, Communism was a whole climate of opinion.⁶⁰

Nowhere was the mood more pronounced than in New York’s artistic and literary circles. One of the Party’s most powerful front groups was the American Writers’ Congress, which called for a “new literature” to support a new society, and even convinced President Roosevelt to accept an honorary membership. “The Stalinists and their friends, under multiform disguises, have managed to penetrate into the offices of publishing houses, the editorial staffs of magazines, and the book-review sections of conservative newspapers,” wrote Phillip Rahv, founder of *Partisan Review*, in 1938. The result was de facto censorship, he asserted.⁶¹ Not that Rahv was opposed to Marxism; indeed, he led the charge of the Trotskyites, a rival Communist faction. The debate was not about the merits of Communism; it was about *what form* of Communism was best.

Rand had fled Soviet Russia only to find herself still surrounded by Communists. None of the talk about a new economic order impressed her. Her struggles in Hollywood only reinforced her belief in individualistic values, and she remained committed to the competitive market system her father had thrived under during her youth. Even now, in the depth of the depression, Rand scoffed at any collective solution to the country’s economic agony.

She was particularly outraged by the glowing reports about life in Russia. The Rosenbaums’ letters made clear that conditions had only deteriorated in the years since she had left. Even her highly educated and extremely resourceful family was just scraping by. Her artistic sisters were working as tour guides and dutifully attending political meetings to keep their employment. In his new role as house husband Rand’s father scoured the streets for days in search of a lightbulb. The household rejoiced when Anna Rosenbaum was once able to purchase an entire bag of apples.⁶² Rand had a manuscript that exposed the horrors of life under Communism, but wealthy New Yorkers who had never been to Russia only sniffed at her testimony.

Adding to her cynicism was a battle with Al Woods over *Night of January 16th* that consumed most of 1935. The clash was in some ways inevitable. Rand was a jealous author, unwilling to consider any changes to her plot or dialogue, especially those monologues about the importance of individualism. Woods was a moneymaker, primarily interested in the play for its unusual jury setup. He had little interest in arguing with Rand, instead steamrolling her by talking about all the other hits he had produced. By the time of the first performance she had essentially disowned the play. Later the two would enter arbitration over her royalties.⁶³ It was the start of a pattern that would mark Rand's career. Her name was finally in lights above Broadway, but fame, when it came, was almost as difficult for her as anonymity.

Just as Rand reached her lowest point with Woods, she learned that her new literary agent had managed to sell *We the Living* to Macmillan. Like other publishers, the editorial board at Macmillan had balked at the novel's ideological messages but eventually decided to take a gamble on the work.

The reviews that *We the Living* garnered when it was published in 1936 only reinforced Rand's suspicions that something was terribly wrong in America. The newspapers were filled with propaganda about Russia, but it was Rand's true-to-life novel that was dismissed as a sham. "The tale is good reading, and bad pleading. It is not a valuable document concerning the Russian experiment," wrote the *Cincinnati Times-Star*. *The Nation* doubted that "petty officials in Soviet Russia ride to the opera in foreign limousines while the worker goes wheatless and meatless." Trying to strike a conciliatory note, a Toronto newspaper noted that the 1920s were "a transition period in the life of the nation." That Rand's testimony was inconsistent with "the descriptions of competent observers like Anna Louis Strong and Walter Duranty does not necessarily discredit it entirely."⁶⁴ Even reviewers who praised Rand's writing seemed to assume that her rendition of life in Russia was as imaginative as the improbable love triangle that structured the plot.

There were a few exceptions, mostly among journalists suspicious of the new vogue for all things Soviet. Elsie Robinson, a spirited Hearst columnist, praised Rand effusively: "If I could, I would put this book into the hands of every young person in America.... While such conditions threaten any country, as they most certainly threaten America, no

one has a right to be carefree.”⁶⁵ John Temple Graves, a popular southern writer, was also taken with the book and began touting Rand in his genteel Birmingham dispatch “This Morning.” Another subset of readers was deeply touched by the novel’s emotional power. Rand was unsurpassed at singing the proud, forlorn song of the individual soul. One reader told Rand, “I write in difficulties. The book made such an impression on me that I am still confused. I think it’s the truth of all you say that is blinding me. It has such depth of feeling.”⁶⁶ It was the first of the adoring fan letters Rand would receive throughout her career.

In some important ways *We the Living* was an unquestioned success. The novel was widely reviewed, and almost all reviewers marveled at her command of English and made note of her unusual biography. Rand’s picture appeared in the newspapers, along with several short profiles. When she spoke at the Town Hall Club about the evils of collectivism the column “New York Day by Day” pronounced her an “intellectual sensation.” Yet sales of the book were disappointing. Macmillan printed only three thousand copies and destroyed the type afterward. When their stock sold out the book effectively died. Rand’s chance at literary success had been nipped in the bud.⁶⁷

Disillusioned by the slow demise of *We the Living*, Rand began to ruminate on the state of the nation. She came to political consciousness during one of the most powerful and rare phenomena in American democracy: a party realignment. The old Republican coalition of mid-western moralists and eastern urbanites lay crushed under the weight of the Great Depression. Bank failures, crop failures, and soaring unemployment had scorched across the familiar political landscape, destroying old assumptions, methods, and alliances. Out of the ashes President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was assembling a new coalition among reformers, urban workers, and African Americans that would last for most of the century.

At the base of this coalition was the “New Deal” Roosevelt had offered to American voters in the campaign of 1932. The current depression was no ordinary event, he told his audiences. Rather, the crisis signaled that the era of economic individualism was over. In the past liberalism had meant republican government and laissez-faire economics. Now, Roosevelt redefined liberalism as “plain English for a changed concept of the duty and responsibility of government toward economic life.” His federal

government would assume an active role in moderating and managing the nation's economy. Of course he wasn't sure exactly just how. "Bold, persistent experimentation" was all that Roosevelt could promise.⁶⁸

Rand voted for Roosevelt in 1932, drawn primarily by his promise to end Prohibition, but as she struggled to sell *We the Living* her opinion changed. "My feeling for the New Deal is growing colder and colder. In fact, it's growing so cold that it's coming to the boiling point of hatred," she wrote Gouverneur Morris's wife, Ruth, in July 1936. Her distaste for Roosevelt was cemented by her sense that he was somehow "pink." She told Ruth, "You have no idea how radical and pro-Soviet New York is—particularly, as everyone admits, in the last three years. Perhaps Mr. Roosevelt had nothing to do with it, but it's a funny coincidence, isn't it?"⁶⁹ In a letter to John Temple Graves she moved closer to a conservative position. She agreed with Graves that "big business is crushing individualism and that some form of protection against it is necessary." But she added, "The term 'umpired individualism' frightens me a little."⁷⁰ Rand wondered just who the umpire would be.

The 1936 election did little to reassure. Threatened by populist demagogues like Huey Long and Father Coughlin, Roosevelt tacked hard to the left. During the campaign he pounded away at "economic royalists," framing himself as the only responsible champion of the common man. Roosevelt's presidency set the terms of modern politics, establishing such institutions as Social Security, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the National Labor Board, the Federal Aviation Administration, and the Federal Communications Commission. He was creating the basic outlines of the administrative state, securing both the livelihood of impoverished Americans and his own political fortunes.⁷¹

Rand watched all this with growing suspicion. The idea that government had a "duty" to manage economic life reminded her of those soldiers who had taken over her father's business. She was further unnerved by the radicals that seemed to swarm around Roosevelt and had wormed their way into the highest citadels of American intellectual and political life. Rand could see little difference between armed Communist revolution and Roosevelt's rapid expansion of the federal government. She railed against both. It was an opposition that quickened her pulse and fired her pen. A lifelong obsession with American politics had begun.

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