ONE MORE FOR THE ROAD

PETER ALSON

WHILE HE WAS WRITING *The Fight*, his account of the epic boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman in Zaire, my uncle discovered a book of *Bantu* philosophy that excited him because it articulated an idea he had always held but never expressed that people were not so much beings as they were forces.

I thought of that when he was in the hospital at the end of his life, in a weakened state, voice muted by the tube in his trachea, because his force, or what the African tribesmen called *muntu*, was still so powerful. On what would turn out to be the last day of his life, the whole family gathered in his hospital room. The doctors had warned us that his organs were failing, but when we saw the light in his blue eyes along with the return of some of that irrepressible Mailer energy, none of us could believe they were right. Don't read too much into it, they said. A dying man sometimes receives a last gift of clarity and energy before the end.

Our own energy, by contrast, seemed to ebb and flow, and go up and down, and so we took turns and spelled each other, and people went out and people came back. At one point, several of us were in the room, and my phone rang. It was Michael Mailer. He was out having lunch with some of the others. He said, "Do you think Dad would like a last drink?" This immediately struck me as a great idea. I leaned in close to the bed and said, "Norm, Michael wants to know if you'd like him to bring back a drink for you…." My uncle's eyes did a veritable jig. "What'll it be?" I asked him. "Scotch? Vodka tonic? Rum and OJ?"

Waiting for Michael to get back with the booze, Norman began to get impatient. Twice, he mouthed the words, "Dammit, where's that drink?"

Michael finally returned with a bottle of rum and a container of orange juice. But all we had was a plastic cup which, if you knew my uncle, was

THE MAILER REVIEW, VOL. 2, NO. 1, FALL 2008. Copyright © 2008. The Norman Mailer Society. Published by The Norman Mailer Society.

worse than no cup at all. So Michael went to the nurses' station and managed to get a real glass, and we started to mix the drink. Norman took over at this point, indicating the correct proportions for water, orange juice, and rum. One last problem: how to give it to him. Because of the breathing tube in his throat, he wasn't supposed to drink; he could choke. Sacrilege, but we had to give him the drink with one of those lollipop-shaped sponge-on-a-stick thingies. I dipped the sponge in the glass then put it in his mouth. He gave a look of utter exasperation. Then he grabbed the glass out of my hand. I looked to Michael. He shrugged. We all watched as Norman put the glass to his lips and took a nice long sip. Then another. He was going to drink that drink the way it was supposed to be drunk even if killed him.

After a few sips, he allowed himself a smile. We all did. Norman held up the drink and pointed at each of us. He wanted us all to share the drink with him. So we passed the glass around and we each took a sip, drinking in the Mailer *muntu* and the sweet taste of the rum.