# NORMAN MAILER IN "GOD'S ATTIC"

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THE POST-CLIMAX of Norman Mailer's *An American Dream* (1965) features Stephen Rojack (some might say the author's virtual alter ego) in the desert, outside Vegas, in a surreal phone booth, ideal for a celestial call to his dead lover, Cherry, now with Marilyn Monroe. But Rojack, uncharacteristically, remains speechless, hangs up the phone, and makes no phone call the next morning because this Mailer protagonist was "something like sane again." Moreover, he is headed due south to the jungles of Guatemala and Yucatan. The starting point for such a seminal exit from America is the Vegas desert, just a casino chip's throw from America's real nadir point, Death Valley.

There was nothing Arctic about Mailer's 1965 novel, or was there?

This Maileresque literary fallout was conceived before Mailer's flash, five-day visit to Alaska in April 1965. Imagine a literary mind experiencing such a one-man, in-house American culture shock from hot sandy Nevada to the 49th state the size of Texas, California and Montana combined, including three million lakes. And a coastline double the size of all the Lower 48 states. Alaska also boasts of its one glacier—the size of Holland—and its outdoor adventures with animals far outnumbering humans, a mere 300,000 plus, the population of a single mid-sized Lower 48 city. Alaska, indeed, is a huge hunk of wild Americana.

Mailer, Brooklyn bred, literary celebrity, seasoned traveler, and existential doer, was interviewed in London about his Alaska Odyssey two weeks after his Arctic visit. Mailer said: "There are one or two places a man can visit in his lifetime that affect him as an existential experience. Alaska was one of those places for me."

I had yet to ask Mailer, "Where's the other place?" I had my opportunities. I might have been the first to ask because I witnessed Mailer's Day Two in Anchorage, and his three-day *finale* in Fairbanks. There, at the State Uni-

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versity of Alaska, I was an assistant professor in the English Department, teaching while turning a Mailer dissertation into a Mailer book. I was there, live. I was also one of the few who were "hip" to the Alaskan academic magic that prompted (virtually tricked) a reluctant Mailer to visit Alaska.

Edmund Skellings (later to become a Messiah of high tech art, a.k.a. the "Electric Poet") was my best friend and fellow PhD candidate at the State University of Iowa. There, Ed and I first met the Norman Mailer.

*Esquire* (the home magazine of Mailer's eight-part serialization [Jan–Aug 1964] of *An American Dream*) had sponsored a college road show, "Symposium for Writers," a panel that included Mailer, Mark Harris, Dwight Macdonald, and others. During its Iowa City stopover, and after the panel presentation, Ed and I pressed the flesh with Mailer—who responded with warm wit and a promise to keep this mellow threesome mood going that night at the party at Donald Justice's home.

I arrived a bit late at the poet's house. Don Justice told me that Mailer and Mark Harris had shouted and wrestled and that Mailer, in a huff, had exited the party with Ed Skellings—seemingly gone for good.

The next morning Ed had news. He and Mailer had hit it off. After verbal sparring and some marijuana, Mailer was exposed to what he later, smilingly, called: "Skelling's formidable breeziness," and at its inception, instant friendship. Skellings added that Mailer was not his but "our" friend.

Ed graduated from Iowa and stationed himself in a lively English Department at Fairbanks, about 140 miles south of the Arctic Circle. I had remained in Iowa City to finish up my last year in the doctorate program when, suddenly, I received this message: "Come north, Good Buddy, and share in my high professorial adventures." Ed really tempted me when he flew to New York and fell flush into one of those famous Norman Mailer Brooklyn Heights parties. At one of them, this conversation took place:

"Norman," Skellings said, "you're going to Alaska."

Mailer replied, "The hell I am."

Those in the Mialer inner circle then, as always, said, "No one tells Norman Mailer what to do." I got the Iowa City jitters. How formidable could a best friend be? Upon graduation, I joined Ed in Fairbanks, September 1964.

What an operatic happening it was when two former Massachusetts high school friends reunited in Alaska, Ed Skellings and Mike Gravel. How fortuitous. Gravel, a liberal Democrat, was the Speaker of the Alaskan Lower

House and, except for the governor, was the most powerful politician in Alaska. Gravel was on the lookout for likely staffers and bumped into (supposedly) two word-rich academics. Immediately, Mike, Ed, and I became friends.

Our University English Department was well funded. We were told: "Bring up that Norman Mailer and Ralph Ellison to celebrate our next early snowy spring."

How could Mailer snub such a bountiful invitation? He almost did.

He responded with three "existential stipulations."

(Late 1964 was the onset of Mailer's more distinct political phase. There was the earlier [1963] *The Presidential Papers*. *Esquire* [November 1964] published *In the Red Light: A History of the Republican Convention*; then the celebrated *The Armies of the Night* [1968], culminating in the 1969 Mailer-Breslin ticket in the Democrat Primary for the New York City Mayoralty.)

When the Alaskan offer arrived, Mailer was probably in a high-risk political existential mood. Hence, three stipulations. His counteroffer: "Do the undoable, or else!" Mailer would visit Alaska only if:

(1) He must be greeted at the Juneau Airport by the governor;
(2) He must be escorted to the state capitol building and be permitted to address both Houses in session (a real political challenge);
(3) He must be allowed to attend a Democratic Party caucus meeting.

All these "musts" sounded to Ed and me like a Maileresque "Catch-22." These details were sent to us by Mailer saying, in essence, that he had vetoed the visit and was having *realpolitik* fun.

How was Mailer expected to fully comprehend our Mike Gravel "connection"?

Try to imagine Mailer's surprise when, on February 6, 1965, Governor William Egan wrote to him:

> I am sure that your visit to the University of Alaska in Fairbanks as a lecturer during the 1965 Festival of Arts will benefit the University and the State. May I invite you to be my guest for a day in Juneau prior to your appearance in Fairbanks? We look forward to your stay with us.

In *The Presidential Papers*, Mailer defined politics as "the art of the possible." Mike Gravel, indeed, was Alaska's supreme artist.

Skellings immediately wrote to Mailer that Mike Gravel, Speaker of the Alaska House, would take care of all his arrangements in Juneau and Anchorage before Mailer came to Fairbanks. Skellings wrote: "I imagine you should arrive Juneau on April 1 for the day with the Governor and Demo party caucusing on the second. Anchorage on the third. Then here for lecture with Ellison."

I did not witness, firsthand, Mailer's initial ground-time in Alaska, but Mike Gravel did. On the next day in Anchorage, where Ed and I were still preparing for Day Two's festivities, Mike told me that he and Bill Egan had greeted Mailer at the Juneau Airport and that Mailer was escorted on a comprehensive tour of the capital, climaxed with more than polite applause when the state's guest of honor appeared at a joint session of both Houses of the Alaskan State Legislature: There was thunderous applause before and after Mailer's undoubtedly tasty and serendipitous remarks. The *finale* included Mailer attending a meeting of the Democrat Party Caucus (a nonmember was usually considered unimportant) which, undoubtedly, made Mailer feel like a real politician.

The happy endings of those three stipulations continued on into that evening at the governor's home, where Mr. and Mrs. Egan hosted an unpretentious dinner, which Mailer described as "pleasant." House Speaker Gravel did not have to say that Mailer's Juneau stopover was both political and peaceful.

Anchorage, the next stop, was no Juneau (the latter, tiny, inaccessible by road, a political microcosm and little else). Anchorage was Alaska's largest city and cosmopolitan center. There, in a flight from Juneau, Gravel and Mailer landed at what was also the Speaker's home city, which Mailer, after one fulsome day, would later in Fairbanks label Anchorage as "Little Las Vegas."

Mailer was not a one-night tourist. On the contrary, he was an in-depth observer and, in retrospect, I sensed what Mailer would soon perceive: just ignore those majestic seas and mountains and you could imagine yourself being in any small city in Nevada or Montana. Fairbanks, a real wilderness city, awaited Mailer, reputedly the leading urban American exponent of the German psychologist and existentialist philosopher, Karl Jaspers (1883–1969). High risk behavior with a dash of violence was Mailer's literary reputation. Anchorage and Fairbanks awaited.

Anchorage offered little time for unscripted events. Norman, Ed, and I took a few catnaps and slept over at the spacious home of Tom Bischel, a Gravel friend, influential businessman, and maestro of the Mailer visit. Gravel, however, was the official Anchorage host. He and Bischel asked Mailer about his urban wants and places he wanted to visit. Mailer was mindful of his notoriety, spawned by his violence-prone essay, "The White Negro," and the live Black Power racial violence swirling in the Lower 48. Ralph Ellison, author of *Invisible Man*, was going to debate this upstart "White Negro" in Fairbanks. Mailer's one-day preoccupation was with minorities. We did some brief sightseeing, but mostly short stops in black neighborhoods where Mailer met with local residents and politicians. In mid-afternoon, we rushed to an Anchorage TV station for a scheduled videotaping of a Mailer-Gravel-Skellings-Kaufmann panel discussion for a statewide audience. The next stop was a media-inspired Mailer farewell.

Anchorage's Western Hotel was the site for a well-advertised, open door reception or "Come Meet Controversial Norman Mailer." The most civilized segment of the Alaskan populace was about to press the flesh with America's most reputed belligerent literary celebrity, off and on the page. I was the official host. I was positioned at the entrance to greet the friendly and the curious. They glared and spoke the same tongue.

"Where's that tough guy?"

"Where's that wife-knifer?"

Just then, the vast reception room became surreal. I made the rounds for a few hours, keeping my eyes on the crowd. Each time Mailer was accosted, he remained gentlemanly and conciliatory. Then, suddenly, Mailer was out of the circle and into a ring, involved in a crazy sort of fisticuffs, mostly lunges and misses, but uniformed security made instant peace, and Mailer swaggered back into his inner circle, with an Irish smile and a fresh drink.

By the end, I was a mixture of alcohol and fatigue, but I could decipher Gravel's and Bischel's smiles. Tonight had been an unforgettable success. A nightcap celebration was in order. Why not duplicate our daytime travels, the canvas of black precincts, with a midnight session at Anchorage's prize black nightclub?

I vaguely recall dim lights and faces, and piping-hot Soul music and a full rocking dance floor and I think I sat at a big table, full of converging "I-know-Norman-faces." All was a murky mood. Then I saw the rarest of sights. I nudged Ed Skellings and said, "Look, Norman Mailer is dancing."

His partner was a woman much taller and more rubbery. As for her partner, was he boxing or dancing? Mailer, the music notwithstanding, was doing a crouch; his feet doing gymnasium shuffles; his arms extended at eye-level, and his ungloved fists jabbing (rat-a-tat-tat) the air. I said to myself: "Norman Mailer, the worst dancer in this room, if he stayed on that dance floor long enough would invent a New American Dance." The rest of the night was a blur.

Early in the morning after the Anchorage reception, four passengers (Mailer, Bischel, a hitchhiker, Skellings, and Kaufmann) were picked up for a private and direct flight into the heart of interior Alaska and what remained of the American Frontier. Barney Gottstein, another Anchorage tycoon and Gravel friend, provided his private Beechcraft Baron and a pilot.

Mailer's fact-finding quest turned more existential and mystical in Fairbanks. Gone was picturesque and politicized Juneau and would-be urbanized Anchorage. Fairbanks was an oxymoronic microcosm, a "Wilderness City."

Imagine brand-new real estate next to log cabins, swank motels (two) next to Eskimo strip-joints, a musk ox farm next to a state university, and, the civic eyesore—a mammoth suburban junkyard. And those downtown streets, frequented in summer by overfed tourists and, in winter, by underfed dog packs. A Fairbanks illustrated "city directory" could have been a best seller. Mailer, in three mere days, could not experience all this aberrant Americana. However, he sensed it.

On the April 4 arrival, Mother Nature had her own welcome mat. Mailer got off Barney Gottstein's plane and stepped onto snow, compact winter permanent, snow. (Spring in Fairbanks happens when the ice-locked Chena and Tanana rivers break and the skies above Creamer Field darken with southern birds. Mailer also experienced more culture shock. That's what usually happens when a newcomer first breathes in Fairbanks's super-clean air. Mailer remarked about enhanced visibility. He was ecstatic. "I can't even breathe in Brooklyn," he said.

With renewed lungs, eyes, and an aired-out brain, Mailer introduced himself to this wilderness city. He was a quick study and I surmised that he was initially on the prowl for more data and lore concerning minorities, priming himself for the main event—the Ellison Debate.

Mailer's Alaskan fascination also included Fairbanks's more mundane aspects. It was Alaska's second-largest city (population about 35,000), called

the "Chicago of Alaska," being the goods-and-services supply hub for the vast upper two-thirds of the entire state. Fairbanks was also the Interior's media and military capital. Of all fifty states, during our Vietnam controversy, Alaska sported the highest "hawkish" mind-set because the Vietnam War was viewed as a pursuit of common sense. Win or leave. Fairbanks also served as the entertainment center for soldiers and civilians alike. From outlying Interior bases, military personnel would converge on Alaska's "Sin City," joining up with local hedonists, losing themselves in the too-good-to-be-true Wild West.

Clearly, this city was ripe for a Norman Mailer visit. Mailer led the way with a flexible agenda: (1) literary work and play plus good booze and conviviality; (2) Big speech and debate; (3) A farewell bash.

Activities were carefully planned and time was devoted to the Alaskan Writer's Workshop. Mailer visited the campus and spent hours counseling and critiquing student writers with wisdom and wit.

Mailer's prime focus was minorities, yet Fairbanks had no black unrest, no black precincts, nary a black presence, except at Wainwright and Eielson. The city's only sizeable black presence was military, not residential.

Fairbanks may strike some visitors as alien or weird, but not newcomer Mailer, who seemed instantly homegrown. Tommy's Elbow Room, a stellar downtown pleasure center, famed for its giant live fireplace and its livelier cocktails and music, where artsy revelers congregated, was ideal turf for an inquisitive and philosophical writer. Mailer was at his best. It was the same for his encore at the International Hotel & Bar, which offered a galaxy of foreign brews, a lure for the connoisseur suds-tippler.

Alcohol use in Fairbanks was a way of life, like eating and breathing—a daily ritual. Mailer, drink in hand, heard "timber" instead of "cheers." A local legend, Big Bill King, lavish spender, had spoken to the patrons of the bar. Everyone within earshot received, gratis, a refill. Yelling "timber" meant buying the house. Mailer, along with a newly arrived drink, pressed the flesh with the Mysterious Spender. (No one knew "Big Bill's" money source or motivation.) Mailer was then introduced to barroom poker-dice, a throwback to pre-statehood gambling. Almost every place that sold liquor over the bar offered the buyer a choice of payment: cash or poker-dice with the barkeep—essentially double-or-nothing. Mailer must have concluded that drinking in Alaska was an art and, like politics, the art of the possible. Mailer remained, drink after drink, the existential visitor, welcoming the unpredictable.

The main event of Mailer's visit to Alaska was the debate with Ellison. Ironically, no real or formal debate ensued. The term "debate" was mere advertisement for the University of Alaska's Spring Festival of Arts. Instead of a boxing ring, two celebrity authors shared the same podium. The joint topic for these prominent writers was billed as "Conflicts in Culture." Yet there was minimal conflict. Ellison, as expected, remained the gentlemanly academic author. Mailer, full of Alaskan magic, was quite mellow. The audience of eighteen hundred enthusiasts was in a good mood.

I was there and I introduced Mailer.

Mailer and Ellison each spoke for about thirty minutes, followed by moderate rebuttals, subsequently followed by a question and answer session. Mailer became author-prophet. In his Arctic odyssey, he had discovered a medicine for a cancerous "other" America. He had arrived with existential minorities on his mind and in search of a possible cultural template. Tonight, Mailer had come to predict and to warn: "In the future, Alaska could become the very best or the very worst of states." After my introduction, I heard Mailer say: "God's attic holds the message." And then he made the following statements:

> All the messages of North America go up to the Brooks Range. That land above the circle, man, is the land of icy wilderness and the lost peaks and the unseen deeps and spires, the crystal receiver of the continent.
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> ....
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> The extraordinary aspect of the Alaskan psyche is that the future of this state is totally unknown. But it is an unknown in extremes, for the end result will be one of two opposites, the best or the worst.
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> ....
>
> You could become the psychic leader of America, revitalizing all the dead circuits and dead fuses. It is a responsibility Alaskans should face up to.

Mailer then shifted to "Existential Minorities," an original offshoot of his "The White Negro," and racial strife in that "other" America:

> A minority group is caught between two basic conflicts of culture. This conflict has meaning and takes substance only within the minority group, of course, and perhaps you could say that one culture exists within the other culture, creating the conflict.
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> ....
>
> I am a one-man minority group. I have to contend with two opposing forces, two cultures. In a minority group we have a life psychology built upon two rocks sometimes dangerously far apart.
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> ....
>
> We're forced to go through life with a psychology profoundly different from most people—a very divided existential psychology.
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> ....
>
> To balance the conflict, we consider ourselves in two different ways, as superior or inferior, and this can be a conflict within itself.
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> ....
>
> When you're within a minority group, your ego is always on edge—always on an elevator going up or down. When you walk along the street the people you meet and see, depending on who they are, cause your ego to rise or fall and splinter in different ways. It's up and down all the time, and never stable.
>
> ....

> According to this notion, everyone in Alaska can be said to be a member of a minority group. This state has more of a divided sense of itself than any state I've ever been in. Alaskans have sort of a vast, group inferiority complex, feeling themselves backward and behind the cultural development of other states. Yet, at the same time Alaskans are intensely proud. There are people willing to die for this state.
>
> ....
>
> And so, as a minority group, you spend your life constantly redefining your role within the dominating group.

Mailer deftly linked the Two Americas and Alaska's "divided sense" to similar split-personality situations in rural Lower 48 towns: "In one sense, you feel inferior, and think of yourselves as hicks. You feel a lack of security as inferiors to the big-city sophisticates. Yet, in the other sense, you feel yourself as the 'best goddam-people-in-America." Such was the crux or soul of the Mailer message. I could well imagine the Alaskan psyches a-buzz with becoming either the "very best" or the "very worst." As for Mailer, there was but one "final adventure."

Yes, with Norman Mailer surprises never end. The farewell bash provided the setting for the second Maileresque self-defined moment. The bash itself was anticlimatic. All the "right sorts" appeared: Our mayor (a one-time barber), other community notables, and university people, president included. Even the radical faculty from outlying Dogpatch dropped in.

Expectations were in the air. Ellison, as ever low-keyed and dapper, kept spellbinding his fans. The other guest of honor—as usual, stage center, Irish glint, American drink, pleasantly besieged by well-wishers, and sounding Brooklyn Heights and Provincetown gone native. The bash seemed destined for a peaceable, perhaps merry conclusion.

Earlier, before the bash, there was a commotion outside, an iota of Anchorage violence Mother Nature flashed on cue. Aurora borealis swirled above snow—not too slippery, just right—for fisticuffs. The scene was set for a bout of city wilderness-violence.

Mailer, upon arrival was accosted by an uninvited, downtown attorney, a reputed drunk (once drunk, he became belligerent to everybody). I was left

outdoors to defuse this altercation and get Mailer inside, safely into the welcoming arena. What ensued was seriocomedy at the very least. Two mock-pugilists were doing a crouch-and-shuffle (shades of an Anchorage dance floor). The inebriated attorney was the aggressor, mouthing words worthy of a roughhouse saloon. Mailer, barely tipsy, responded with alternate growls and purrs, uncharacteristically tentative, hit-or-stop.

What was I to do? I was an impromptu referee for a phantom fight but, each time I tried to be a third party, Mailer shot me a "get lost" look. For one long twenty minutes these two Arctic sluggers kept it peaceful with their shadow-boxing, body-talking. Mailer then said "Some other time." The attorney said, "No, now, now!"

A drunk is a drunk but Mailer is barely tipsy. Was this encounter just another chapter of the Mailer/Hemingway code—grace under pressure? Drunkenness, however, proved decisive. The attorney slipped and fell, Mailer helped him to his feet, and the attorney said: "O.K. Some other time. Tomorrow, 10 a.m. sharp. At downtown's Stan's Cafe."

Mailer didn't even blink. The attorney drifted off and I spirited Mailer inside.

In the midst of a busy farewell morning, Mailer took time out to show up at Stan's Cafe at 10 a.m. sharp, and waited a full twenty minutes. The attorney was a no-show, probably asleep and finally sober. At 10:20 a.m. sharp, no one could read Norman Mailer's mind. I did not witness this. Norman told me this later on. I can only add—who else but Norman Mailer, under the same circumstances, would have showed up at Stan's Cafe?

I now turn to afterthoughts about our 49th State and its 1965 essence. Any mere five-day visit can be but only a glimpse of Alaska in its challenges and expectations. In Mailer's sensibility, Alaska meant unpredictable plus extraordinary, equaling *existential*. But even a worldly wise Mailer, in five days, could only sample and speculate. Mailer, concluded, for example, that Alaska had the "best air" in America, and this was true most of the time.

Mailer had never experienced Alaska's ice fog. Such dread winters are unknown in the Lower 48 because ice fog can only form if the temperature remains, for about a week, at or lower than −40°. Such a fog affects Fairbanks about two or three weeks each winter. The longer the −40°, the more massive the fog. Soon, above Alaska's second-largest city, a cloud would form, filled with carbon monoxide. This, in turn, was caused by an overabundance of autos on Fairbanks's streets, coughing out warm sooty exhaust

fumes quickly freezing into ice crystals. Thus, at ground zero, walking or driving, whether emergency or derring-do, amid all this pea soup toxic fog reminded one of being on an urbanized Moon or Mars.

Mailer had never experienced any of this, and it was America's worst air. Yet Mailer hinted, during the debate, of such adverse local color as ice fog: "You're not like other states. You don't have the same psychological security that the other states have. You're up here alone and cut off from the rest of your identity and because of this you have to learn to live without security." With such insight into the exceptional nature of Alaska, Mailer had acutely sensed what Alaskans call Storm Fear—or what Mailer might have called "Existential Mother Nature."

Nature in Alaska could be picturesque, mellow, sublime, or just plain deadly. Bush pilots, highly skilled and familiar with jagged mountain wind patterns, sometimes just disappeared. Fairbanks's finest pilot, Don Jonz, my neighbor and friend took off on a highly publicized political junket, with special passenger Louisiana's Congressman Boggs plus some Alaskan politicians and the plane disappeared. Machine and passengers remain unaccounted for to this day. Mailer was astounded on seeing so many privately owned aircraft, parked in long rows. Alaskans call such planes Alaskan taxicabs.

Mailer, in the Ellison debate, was remarkably prophetic when he warned the Fairbanks audience: "You could become the very worst; a big Las Vegas at sixty below. There's already a priggishness alive in this state, people greedy to get all the plastic buildings up here just as fast as they can." If, at the moment, I could have foreseen Fairbanks's near future, I would have jotted and underlined: *Prudhoe Greed Invasion*.

As for Mailer's ultimate 1965 Alaskan Mystery—either the "best" or the "worst" state, I can only add a few more words. No doubt there are still small pockets of individualized common sense, perhaps, some evolutionary mode of Mailer's "existential minority." Otherwise, 1965 Fairbanks is dead and gone.

What remains of the ultimate Mailer American Mystery? I cannot imagine Alaska ever becoming the "worst" state without Mother Nature's full cooperation. As for Alaska being the "best," I can only echo the lament: "Such hope is 'all over' up here." But I'm glad that Norman Mailer experienced five of its last glory days.

What remains to be told of "Mailer in Alaska" is my own memory high spot—and perhaps also was Mailer's. This experience was truly an epiph-

any. It occurred above Mount McKinley, at 20,300 feet the highest point in North America. On the Mailer itinerary, this epiphany was the first of two, the latter being the mock fisticuffs during the farewell bash, in the snowy outdoors, where Mailer neutralized a violently drunk attorney, perhaps with an Arctic display of Papa Hemingway's "grace under pressure." I mention this because I sensed that "Papa's spirit" joined Mailer's "big eyes" over Mount Denali, the Alaskan Native name for Mount McKinley. This epiphany was purely literary.

It was Mailer's idea, in mid-flight from Anchorage to Fairbanks, not to bypass, but to say hello to the Big One: Mount Denali. A "hello" from Norman Mailer meant "buzzing the mountain's top." When Mailer asked that this be done, Barney Gottstein's pilot immediately turned and nodded yes to Alaska's guest of honor.

Up to that moment, the pilot's four passengers were in various degrees of wakefulness. The seating arrangement was: pilot up front, behind him on the left sat Skellings, behind him, Mailer; and on the right, across from Skellings, I sat and, behind me, sat Tom Bischel, the millionaire hitchhiker. My vantage point was perfect. I had Mailer in full view all the time. Skellings and I were dead tired from day and night Anchorage revelry. But Mailer, alone, seemed primed. The pilot announced that buzzing that high required "sucking oxygen" (mouth-inhalers in small containers). Anyone familiar with the 1960s drug culture knew that this meant "getting high."

Then, another significant Mailer observation. He put on eyeglasses. A Provincetown legend held that Mailer was vain about his imperfect vision and that eyeglasses equaled unmanly or, as a takeoff on the ("don't dance") title of Mailer's later (1984) novel, *Tough Guys Don't Wear Glasses*. And, so the legend went, when Norman Mailer puts on his spectacles, he is expecting nothing less than an epiphany.

For twenty long minutes, Barney's pilot made low passes around the peak or higher, and with each pass, buzz, or mind-skimming of Denali's top, I looked down and wondered what Mailer was imagining or seeing, as he sucked oxygen with an extra pair of eyes.

During that twenty-minute hello to Denali, I could not foresee Mailer's next novel, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967), oddly entitled because the word "Vietnam" appears but once—in the book's final phrase, "Vietnam, hot dam." Most of the novel's "hot dams" took place in Alaska and mostly in remote, stark wilderness—the Brooks Range.

There, reincarnations of "Big Oil" and "Big Greed" in the guise of yahoo Texan hunters (with a zero hunter's code) visited the Arctic for hi-tech slaughter of the wildlife. With such "messy" tactics, someone like Papa Hemingway would have "offed" those Texans. Mailer, instead, used literary ammunition—a novel, a pop culture acerbic comedy of Arctic wilderness being despoiled by the mechanistic arts of a so-called American Civilization gone berserk.

Above Denali, with Mailer just an arm's length away, I lost myself in simultaneous images of Papa Hemingway peering down on Kilimanjaro, seeing a frozen leopard, and Mailer (on Alaskan oxygen plus magic) peering down on Denali, seeing (and believing) what? "Would there have been a Mailer Vietnam novel without us being here?"

Such literary fancy has an afterlife. My belief that twenty minutes over Denali was the genesis of Mailer's Vietnam novel causes me to wonder how Stephen Rojack, the protagonist-narrator of *An American Dream* (1965) would have behaved had Mailer created him after—and not before—his five-day Alaskan visit.

There are ample literary cues. The somewhat tight time line between the writing and publishing of two key novels (*An American Dream* and *Why are We in Vietnam?*) and, at approximate mid-point, the Alaskan visit. There was also an autobiographical linkage. Rojack, of all the protagonists, remains the most "authorial self," in J. Michael Lennon's phrase. Lennon also refers to Rojack as "Mailer's fictional cousin" (9). Rojack, pointedly, is Lower 48–rooted, a professor of existential psychology, with a fondness for magic, not Alaska styled. However, with a five-day booster shot of Alaskan magic inside Mailer the Creator, how would Rojack have acted and ended? I leave the "acts" for future Mailer scholars.

As for an Alaska-inspired ending of Mailer's *An American Dream*, a "new" Rojack must have a new "post-climax"—or call it epilogue. Let him redo the Vegas exit. Keep the surreal desert phone booth. But before he dials, imagine that he knows what his fictional cousin now knows—that wilderness cities may come and go, but there's always authentic wilderness up north in the Brooks Range.

Rojack's departure time is now, not tomorrow, but his destination is not foreign jungles but deep inside America, and this time he's not speechless when he phones some "wilderness city," somewhere, to say Hi to Cherry and

Marilyn, before exiting due north, direct, to the Brooks Range to say hello and press the flesh with God.

### Three Postscripts

(1) Soon after Mailer's departure, Anne Barry, his former office assistant (now freelancing for *Esquire*) was assigned to cover Alaska. Mailer phoned Skellings and me and said: "Show Anne around." This we did, showing her all the high spots, some still alive with the Mailer scent. Anne Barry was enthralled with Alaska. She, surprisingly, said that she might decide to permanently live up here. She never did nor did Mailer ever come back for a follow-up visit.

(2) *Time* magazine, shortly thereafter, decided to do a special Mailer front cover issue. A *Time* staff writer was to assigned to wine and dine Skellings and me. We provided photo-ops, interviews, and local color comments. We were ecstatic. (Imagine being in such a prestigious American magazine.) *Time* then soon reported that the Mailer cover issue was put on hold. Much later, I was told that Mailer refused all cooperation and *Time* subsequently killed the project.

(3) House Speaker Mike Gravel went on to serve two terms (1969–1981) as Alaska's Senator. Most recently (2008) Gravel was a Democratic Party candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination.

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