

MEETING MAILER

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IT WAS THE EARLY 1970S. I was living in Provincetown, Massachusetts, on a writing fellowship at the Fine Arts Work Center. Across Commercial Street, the narrow lane meandering through town, cater-cornered to the garret apartment where I lived, was a big red brick house on Cape Cod Bay. A young woman, Bobbi, worked in that house as a cook and housekeeper for Norman Mailer. Bobbi lived in the ground floor apartment of the building I lived in and over the fall and winter months we became friends.

"You should meet Norman," Bobbi said to me one evening as we sat drinking wine and talking. "You guys would hit it off."

By then I was already a Mailer aficionado. I had come to his writing through his movies. On a whim one night I went to a screening at Brandeis of *Beyond the Law*—it was the title that attracted me. Ninety minutes later I walked out of the auditorium determined to read Mailer, for anyone who could make a film that bold and outrageous about cops and criminals, I knew, had to have much to teach me about writing.

I read Mailer over the next several months, and, during the summer while I attended a writing course at Harvard, his alma mater, I got up the nerve to write him a letter. First I read the early novels, *The Naked and the Dead*, *Barbary Shore*, *The Deer Park*, then, *The Armies of the Night*, and I was hooked. This was, after all, a time when the death of the novel had already been announced and readers and writers of fiction were in mourning. Given what we were living through at the time—the Kennedy and Martin Luther King assassinations, the war in Vietnam and rioting in the streets of American cities, as seen on the evening news—reading fiction was a bit like reading obituaries. The potential for fiction to ignite the public consciousness had been usurped by reporting current events and what was to become known as the new journalism. With *The Armies of the Night*, Mailer became its stellar

performer, there in the event, balls to the wall, and back at his desk, writing with a hard-on.

Reading Mailer changed my life. This was the kind of writer I wanted to be, the kind of man I hoped to be: *engagé*. He lived what he wrote about and then wrote about what he lived as though the quality of his life depended on the truth he discovered in the experience, reflected by the prose. I said to myself, after reading *Advertisements for Myself*, I've got to meet this guy. First I communed with him psychically, then on paper. I wrote him a short letter inspired by his essay "Ten Thousand Words a Minute," which was first published in *Esquire*, on the death of Benny "Kid" Paret at the gloved hands of Emile Griffith. Mailer answered me with an equally concise note, dated 19 August, 1970: *Dear Mr. Stratton: I've been up in Maine and now I'm in New York and won't get to P-town till the fall. Will you still be in Hyannis? If so, I might take you up on your offer. Sincerely, Norman Mailer.*

I'm not sure what exactly I had offered, and in the meantime I had left Hyannis; but the fact that Mailer wrote back was enough to inspire me to decamp and move to Provincetown. The Fine Arts Work Center provided a modest stipend, which I augmented working as a carpenter. It was by chance that I moved into the apartment across the street from the home Mailer rented that off-season, and later bought; and another lucky coincidence, if you believe in such things, that Bobbi lived in the same building I moved into in and we became friends. I like to think I was so turned on by Mailer's work, I wanted so much to know him, I created an energy field that drew me to him and vice versa.

Certainly I was surrounded by Mailer energy. Bobbi lived downstairs, and through her I met Norman's ex-wife, the actress Beverly Bentley, and their two young sons, Michael and Steven, who lived just down the road. In those years I had a big white German shepherd I'd brought back from England, Karamazov was his name; Michael and Steven Mailer called him "Caramel Balls." Half buried in the backyard of the building where Bobbi and I lived, its hood pointed skyward like a rocket, was an old Ford sedan Mailer had memorialized near the end of *Of a Fire on the Moon*. In the evening after work, before I settled in for a night of writing, I would take Karamazov for walks at low tide along the bay shore. I remember once seeing Mailer as Karamazov and I passed by on the beach. I looked up at the house and there was Norman, in the brightly lit bar just off the

deck of his home, laughing, sharing a night of drink and conversation with friends.

I thought, "There he is, the great man himself." He looked good, healthy, his face lean and glowing with mirth.

Then one early spring evening as I limped in after a day of hanging sheet-rock, my knees tender and raw from kneeling on fallen nails, the phone rang. "Hello, it's Norman Mailer." He cleared his throat. "Bobbi's told me a lot about you."

I didn't know what to say; I stammered, "Ah, well, yeah ... And I've heard a lot about you ..."

"I'm going to be watching Monday Night Football," Norman offered, "if you'd like to come over and join me."

Would I? I was exhausted, I wanted to keep up the incremental progress I was making on a novel I was writing, but—a chance to watch Monday Night Football with Norman Mailer? Of course I would. Suddenly there was no vestige of fatigue. I hung up the phone. Norman Mailer. Was this really happening, or was I in some wannabe novelist's fantasy? I showered and wandered across the street still checking myself for signs of delirium. I opened the latch on the little wooden gate, walked up the brick pathway to the front door and rang the bell. Everything seemed real. The door opened and there was Norman Mailer. He invited me into his home.

We watched football, drank whiskey and then cognac, and we talked until first light. I don't remember now specifically what we talked about except that it was the opening conversation of a dialogue that would continue for the next thirty-five years. Certainly we talked about writing, his and mine, and I remember him telling me then that he never discussed work in progress, for his belief was that talking about what one was working on dissipated the creative energies needed to write. He encouraged me to keep working on my novel, though at the time he had read nothing I had written beyond my note, which he remembered. And he said he didn't want to read anything until it was finished, because, either way, if he liked it or not, that could only upset the process. The main thing was to keep at it, he said. One can only become a writer by writing, the work itself is a blessing, and the real joy is to discover some shard of truth on the page at the end of the pen.

I do recall I was smoking a pipe that night, not something I ordinarily did. Maybe I felt I needed it to offset my nervousness at meeting him, but I nearly

smoked Norman out of his own home, filling the small den off the living room where the TV was located with billows of smoke until Norman got up on his knees on the sofa and opened the window, at which point I finally got the hint.

“Is the smoke bothering you?”

“It smells like you’re smoking old shoe leather,” he said and we both laughed.

The sun rose early in spring on that wizened spit of sand and shrub pine curled into the Atlantic. We stumbled out onto Mailer’s front lawn at dawn, both alight with the fires of alcohol and new friendship, arms around each other’s shoulders, the morning air moist and salty. I remember telling Mailer how I got the job as a carpenter by showing my boss the toolbox I had made. Norman said I should quit my job and concentrate on writing. He offered me part-time work building tables for his sons’ electric trains.

Norman was forty-eight; I was twenty-five. That spring we became friends, and then good friends. I built the train tables, did some other small carpentry jobs. I looked after the big brick house when he traveled, and we boxed in the ring in his basement. After one of our bouts, Mailer had a tear in his retina; I did not want to be known as the man who blinded the novelist in one eye. He checked into Massachusetts Eye and Ear and the eye was repaired.

When the hordes of summer re-invaded Cape Cod, I helped Mailer and family move to a rambling home he rented on the Maine coast. Mailer had a new baby, Maggie, with the singer Carole Stevens. Five of Norman’s other then six children joined them for the month of August; his oldest daughter, Susie, was married and living in Chile. Norman and his friend, former Kennedy whiz kid and speechwriter Richard N. Goodwin, bought an old farm in Phillips, Maine, in the Rangeley Lakes region near the Canadian border. After my stint at the Fine Arts Work Center was ended, I moved into the Maine farm and renovated it over the summer and long winter. Goodwin, who had a place in nearby Kingfield, also became a close friend and got me a gig with *Rolling Stone* for a two-part interview with Mailer that was published in January 1975.

Mailer’s generosity as a writer and as a man made me a better person. Whenever I was in a difficult situation, which was often, I would ask myself: *How would Norman handle this?* And I knew he would never take the easy way out. He gave huge energy to his work, to his country, and to his family

and friends. Over the years we remained close. Norman's youngest son, John Buffalo, is one of my closest friends and godfather to my son, Ivan. Stephen Mailer starred with Norman in a pilot I made for a TV series. Michael Mailer is producing two of my films. I'm grateful for every word Norman wrote, every child he fathered, and every smile, every embrace, every word of advice and encouragement, and every head butt he gave me as my friend.