

FELLOW GENIUSES

MAGGIE MAILER

I WOULD LIKE TO SHARE WITH YOU a seminal work of nonfiction by my father: until now, a hidden literary gem, and one that helped me get started in my career as an artist.

I was fifteen, spending the summer in Provincetown with my father, Norris, and my eight siblings. Privacy was scarce, but somehow, a two-week stretch emerged in which I had my own room.

As an only child living with my mother the rest of the year, I was well equipped psychologically to spread out. I decided to tackle a sculpture that I'd been thinking about for some time. As any serious contemplative will do, I began by collecting driftwood. Soon, buckets of sand, and seaweed appeared on the floor. The carpeted floor.

From the Army Navy store in town came more buckets, filled with brass buttons and machine gun bullets, rusted ones, which looked to me like beads for a necklace.

All the while, in my artistic fervor, clothes and wet bathing suits and towels were strewn across the room. I think, subconsciously, I was recreating scenes from *The Naked and the Dead*. Even though, I hadn't read it yet.

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At fifteen I was still too shy to speak easily with my father. Days might pass without conversing, but we would always exchange meaningful looks. We were both absorbed in our work, and I felt we shared the unspoken understanding of artists. I was sure, too, that he recognized in me a fellow genius. So I was not surprised the day when, returning to my room, I found a note from Dad, placed at the entrance, so as not to disturb. "He must be really

impressed to put it in writing,” I thought, and eagerly read his assessment of my work:

Dear Maggie,

Do you look upon your father as some kind of Twit, who is not to be reckoned with? Please take a long, careful, look at this room through my eyes.

Love, Dad

My father was always superstitious about giving compliments. And I knew this. Nonetheless, I was devastated. But, only partially. Because I realized, with real happiness, that my habits mattered to my father. And on some level, he had stopped being Norman Mailer and become just my father. I cleaned up my room.

Dad had a great generosity whereby, if he felt you were serious or excited about something, he would forget his anger, and give you his full attention.

He found me a little later and said, “Listen, I didn’t realize you were up to something in there. I took another look, and I’m pleased. I think you may be an artist. Finish the sculpture, I’d like to live with it a while. Maybe we’ll put it in the Living Room.”