MAILER ON THE EVE OF *ANCIENT EVENINGS*: A MEMORY IN SIX PARTS

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1

LATER, I REALIZED THAT I HAD MET A MAN LIVING IN THE HUSHES, as Emily Dickinson put it, "between the Heaves of Storm." One heave was the ten years spent writing his intended masterpiece, the other was the impending reception of that book. I was but one more distraction for an already distracted and aimless man in the still trough of those heaves.

"For the first time in my life," he said as we began talking, "I understand the feelings of people who've been working all their lives, but at the age of sixty or sixty-five, there they are sitting on a couch or walking around and their wife or husband says, "Relax, darling. Relax!"

Had some Hollywood director set out to film what has become an event in our collective consciousness—call it The-Young-Aspirant-Journeys-to-the-Literary-Master—this is how the director would have shot it. The master's infamous digs would be the set: skylights, bookshelves, rigging and crow's nest, and the picture window facing New York City's financial district, with the Brooklyn Bridge in our right periphery and the Statue of Liberty in our left. The East River traffic below would send up its moans and clangs to the fourth-floor of the Brownstone as we talk. Then there would be, as indeed there was, the beautiful younger wife, the bright child who looks up at me with the searching, innocent eyes of my own daughter, the busy maid, and the photographer who sets up strobe lights and metallic umbrellas. It would be like waiting for the movie camera, but this time life was again imitating art.

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In a distracted state of my own, I was too aware of the classic quality of my experience of him, more conscious of watching than living the event. For I had written a book about him that tried to neglect the personal eccentricities and attend to the art. That book, along with a few other credits worthy of the Aspiring Pilgrim, led *Harvard Magazine* to assign me to interview Norman Mailer in 1982.

2

The scene we were playing in his flat now was, to be sure, a life removed from the scene playing on my trip down early that morning on the commuter train from Darien, where I had stopped over with old friends.

On the train, sleek gray men, bored and arrogant, flip through newspapers. Women dressed to their chins ferret in the financial news. Out in the club car a dozen men in their thirties bare white shirtsleeves, smooth neckties, and business vests. Now silent and faceless, now blowing in mock disgust or threatening in mock anger like boys feigning men, they play poker on both sides of the bar around a pile of dollar bills. A young woman sits atop the bar, her taboo distance away, her legs slightly parted, and laughs with the men. When the train stops at Grand Central and empties into the 85 degree subterranean heat, the card players stay at their game.

3

Standing in the morning sunlight that gushes through the open door of his flat, raising both arms over his head, he greets Chris Johnson, the photographer, and me from the top of his four flights of stairs. A model host, he has prepared coffee himself for us, but it has gone a little bad somehow and he asks his wife Norris Church if she'd mind making us another pot. When she shatters a mug on the floor, we all stop talking.

But we manage to begin again, and amidst the pleasantries and formalities the first thing I notice is the unearthly blue of his eyes. Yes, they are eyes like those "halcyon skies," but the blue is the blue you notice as you really see the sky for the first time in your life. That blue asks you who the hell you are.

Got up in a safari suit for the occasion—not his Harvard '43 tie—he hints one edge of the personality he will give this audience from the start. Later at the editorial offices, I will see that Chris Johnson captured that blue and his bronze wrist clasp, looking like a beautifully carved amulet handed down

from some elderly magus he might have met on Egyptian excursions. There is a swagger and a strut to his walk. His body says: I am the lion, no, King of the Rats. You are in my domain, and I've been crossed before.

I produce my long-planned ice-breaker—the 1958 copy of *True Adventures Magazine*. On the cover a cowboyish stud is trapped in a bamboo cage with three pneumatic geishas. A samurai warrior is rushing through the open bamboo cage, sword flailing. I turn to a story inside entitled "The Gook's Last Raid," by Norman Mailer. But Mailer is unaware of the story's publication. Never made a cent from it. He is unconcerned by the fact, is simply tired from a lifetime of such facts.

Pre-dating *Why Are We in Vietnam?* by a decade, the magazine story turns out to be about a Yank who learns that "gooks" too are human, men with mothers, wives, and children who mourn their deaths. Mailer is more interested in the cheesecake of the month, a woman named Madeline Castle who poses in men's underwear.

"She's a beautiful woman!" Mailer says, and we all laugh.

4

There is a world to be kept at bay. A world both hostile and pleading. During the two hour interview the telephone never stops ringing. But his assistant, Judith McNally, picks up the phone from another office in another building. Afterwards I will overhear him say to her on the phone, "No … No.… Tell him I couldn't possibly do it now, but give him my best."

Recollections of his Harvard years flow easily. Usually he figures as the butt of some joke or embarrassment. We are both relaxed, apparently enjoying this now. I hear Chris snickering as he dodges about for camera angles.

"I'd say I was in a state of shock," Mailer says, describing himself arriving at Harvard as a young Jewish rube from Brooklyn. "The shock was altogether different, much less disagreeable than, let's say, the shock of going into the Army. But equal in measure."

I used to have a seventeen-pound coon cat who loved to catch moles on my lawn. His play would be to make the mole walk a straight line, then give him a flash of freedom, then roll him onto his back, hooking him with one claw, tickling him with one white whisker, flipping him into tight mid-air somersaults.

I see a streak of that cat in Mailer. He dips, feints, weaves, counterpunches, tickles, avoids, then surprises his interviewer again and again. Later, as I read

the raw transcripts the impression strengthens. I see myself at times like a dull, club-footed child who missed precious openings, was satisfied with half-answers, like blows to the elbow, with ripostes in which I alone was scored. In the same manner he has toyed with his future readers, giving them fresh sweets, dosing them with bitters, now playing to their prejudices, now baiting them.

Harvard, he tells me, is the best, most elaborately humane Establishment he has ever encountered. Then in another moment he questions any Establishment's exclusivity and manipulation of people. Then he berates us all for turning life into plastic out of sheer vanity against nature. Next, he is listing recent signs of our impending Judgment in the 1980s.

"It's going to be an unbelievable decade," he says. "So far it seems to me there are little signs. The other day when Princess Grace was killed in a car accident, Bashir Gemayel was killed, John Gardner had his fatal motorcycle accident, and Lester Hemingway committed suicide. Now, I can't remember ever when four celebrated people … of the first magnitude of newspaper identification … had violent deaths in one day. I simply can't remember that."

When I ask him to explain what he meant once in referring to rare moments of inspiration when cosmic forces might "step in and give a helping hand" to a writer, he looks at me for the first time out of the corner of his eye. "You mean, do I believe in that?"

I ask for a speculation.

Had I by some promptings arranged to have him outrage all those readers steeped in the zeal of their own rationalism while pulling my leg as his straight-man buffoon, he could not have responded with more impish malice and delight. He is all but stage whispering and winking at me as he talks rapidly of demi-urges, angels and ogres, gods and devils, and all manner of beings who might visit in our sleep.

And I am only able to get him to take a momentary serious turn on the subject by comparing his original comment on inspiration as possibly something irrational and outside of us to Czeslaw Milosz's *Ars Poetica*.

> The purpose of poetry is to remind us
> how difficult it is to remain just one person,
> for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors,
> and invisible guests come in and out at will ….

> poems should be written rarely and reluctantly,
> under unbearable duress and only with the hope
> that good spirits, not evil ones, choose us for their
> instrument.

"The degree that you dare the prevailing winds," Mailer jumps in, "you set yourself up for some incredible psychic gusts." He speaks for three whole minutes on the necessity of protecting oneself as a writer from such squalls. By now he is completely serious. In one of the most serious moments of the interview—it is almost solemn—I realize how acutely aware he is of his own aging. The metaphors shift from writer as aging Druid to writer as prize-fighter in a twelfth round. He is "battered," he says. His powers of self-protection from all distractions diminish. For the third time he compares the physical grind of a lifetime writing to the grind of being a dentist for forty years, looking every day into people's mouths and making "holes in bones," just as a writer makes scratches on blank white sheets of paper.

It is at this point that he takes the opportunity to explain to all those young writers who have hoped for his encouragement or help why they did not receive it. And he understands why he never received it from his own masters: Hemingway, Dos Passos, Farrell, Marquand, Steinbeck. He learned to rein in any "loose generosity," he explains, so that he could focus his diminished powers on his own concerns toward the end. There is even too little time to read the young, he adds. And their concerns are no longer yours, their technical achievements part of their stage of life as artists who, therefore, have little to teach an old man. "You know," he says, "it's a little bit like watching someone else's child do a wonderful tap dance. That's nice, but at that moment you might prefer listening to a symphony.… And so you're cultivating your own garden more, and more, and more."

At the end of the interview, in answering my final question, Mailer charges himself with being wrong so many times in any day that he has no interest in having people think as he does. But I am reminded, as he speaks, of a moment two hours ago just before starting the interview, just as we were about to sit down on the couch. Norris had come to the telephone and rummaged about looking for a list of phone numbers.

"What numbers?" Mailer asks.

"The ones on the list that were right here by the telephone," she answers.

"Oh.… Well. I think I threw them away."

"Threw them away?"

"I didn't think they were important."

There is a pause. They stare at each other. Chris and I are silent, stopped in our own preparations like an instant frozen in film when the projector jams and begins to heat.

I am suddenly reminded of one of several moments in *An American Dream* when contestants stare one another down, as when Rojack and Cherry are about to make love: "Our wills now met, locked in a contest like an exchange of stares which goes on and on, wills which begin at last in the force of equality to water and to loose tears, to soften into some light which is shut away again by the will to force tears back, steel to steel… ."

"Didn't think they were important?" Norris finally says. We all stare at Norris. Will she smash the surface of the occasion on which we all have danced so far?

"Sorry," Mailer says. All the defeats and prizes of married life seem summed up in his voice that moment.

We sit down on the couch in a stillness like that which followed the shattered coffee mug.

And begin.

5

My last lesson is to be in the techniques of self-protection. After I turn off the tape recorder and put my notes and tapes away, Mailer and I make small talk while Chris takes forever to dismantle and stow his equipment.

Mailer excuses himself a moment and phones his assistant. Then he paces about the apartment. There is a little more self-conscious chitchat. Everyone is perfectly courteous.

I admire the huge, shiny jukebox in the living room.

"Sure it works," he says. "Go ahead. Pick a number. It'll play for you."

I choose Chubby Checker's "Let's Do the Twist."

We laugh while the music booms. Chris drops a lightbulb on the polished floorboards. The thin glass sprays. But the maid is gone, so Mailer sweeps up the shards himself, awkwardly using a long broom and a page torn from *Psychology Today* for a dustpan. The job takes him at least ten minutes.

"I was going to ask you to lunch," he says. "But something's come up."

"That's all right," I say. "I've planned to meet an old friend for lunch anyway. I came in with him on the train this morning."

Then he is writing our addresses down in a ledger book. "I'll have Little, Brown send you both a copy. We should have books by February."

He holds my coat for me as I put it on. Mailer shakes hands with us warmly and we thank one another all around.

"We'll have to get together for a drink, some time," Mailer says.

"Sure," we say and smile. I don't mention that he gave up drinking recently and has proclaimed the benefits of new perceptions that come from sudden abstinence.

6

By three o'clock that afternoon the commuter train is filled up twenty minutes before departure. Many of the men, haggard despite their dark suits and white shirts, carry their briefcases in one hand and a frosted can of beer with a plastic cup inverted over the top in the other. The passengers seem peaceful now. People who do talk speak softly. The mood is one of fatigue, relief, and patience. It is Friday. The day has been clear and blue, warm for September. This may be the last weekend of summer in the Connecticut villages along the commuter line.

As the train jerks into motion, I tap the two one-hour tapes in my breast pocket like an old man checking for his airline tickets, and then I begin to scribble out a draft for the introduction to my interview. By the time we approach Darien, I am reading over my final paragraph.

> *Talking with Mailer today, one sees that the journalist, revolutionary, and the holy fool are still alive in the man, but that other, and certain older, personae have returned after all. For his capacious personality is now inhabited by the disciplined worker, the self-effacing novelist, and the scholar. There is even a wink from that earnest young man from Brooklyn who got good grades and went to Harvard to study engineering*

At the moment it seems right, but not entirely honest. As I play those hours with Mailer over again and again in the dream tape inside my head, I see the actor and the magician of moods most of all. But those qualities in the man are the most elusive now. There is somehow no trace, no concrete correlative, I can summon that will describe my sense of the shifting reali-

ties behind the drama and the hero, nor clarify the distinction between the character and the actor.

But if that imagined movie camera that shot the whole scene from first to last in any way might be said to exist, then perhaps in some time and in some place (if such films ever roll, if our judgments ever do come) the whole mood will have been captured. And the subtle sorcery of the master's performance will be seen.