

MAILER

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THERE ARE PIVOTAL MOMENTS IN LIFE. We all have them. Many of mine revolve around Norman Mailer. We were never great buddies, or even buddies, but every time he made a cameo appearance in my life the experience became vividly recorded in my mind.

He had an outrageous influence on me, and I'm sure he never realized its extent. The last time I saw him, at a party after he made a speech, and was lionized, at Wilkes University in Pennsylvania, when he was getting around on two canes. I said, "You know, Norman, you were my great hero before I ever met James Jones. *The Naked and the Dead* changed my life before I ever heard of *From Here to Eternity*. Yours came first."

He looked at me with that amused smile he took on when relaxed and not threatened, blue eyes shining. "I bet you never told Jim that."

"Of course not. You think I'm crazy?"

The first time I encountered him was not in person but actually through that book. I had recently served in Korea as an 18-year-old soldier, hardly needing to shave, half frozen much of the time, going without a shower or bath for six months, lonely, scared and bereft. Returning home to Tennessee, I sought film and fiction and fact to authenticate what had happened and what I had gone through. *A Farewell to Arms*? Lt. Henry loving up Nurse Katherine in rehab? Are you kidding? All the others, too. I went to one movie with great expectations, one of the first about Korea. The screen lights up and the terrain is Southern California with a palm tree or two. Korea? My time in the army? Give me a break. I would have walked out if I hadn't had that Puritan streak that forced me sit through anything if I'd paid to see it. But *The Naked and the Dead*? I couldn't believe it. Here was what I had been through even if it was set in the jungle and not on the tundra, even if I had been in an Army of Occupation and not dodging bullets in combat. It was

the U.S. Army. It was what I had been through. I recognized the characters. They could have been in my platoon. It was the real McCoy. It was written by a real writer.

Invariably we remember where we read those important books in our lives. We are on a train, on the beach, on a boat, or on a bench in Quebec's Plains of Abraham reading *War and Peace*. I lay in bed late at night on West Watauga Avenue in Johnson City, Tennessee, reading *The Naked and the Dead*. I said to myself, when Wilson was bouncing on the litter shot in the stomach, No, let's get to the end of the chapter, see what happens, and then we'll shut off the light. I lit another cigarette, using an old wooden shaving bowl as an ashtray, and kept on. Red appeared with some bitter thoughts, Hearn came in for some privileged moments, and Gallagher kept up his low Boston chatter while Croft waited on the perimeter like a malevolent cat. I kept reading till the wee hours. Dr. Johnson said that no one ever wished for *Paradise Lost* to have more pages. I never wished for *The Naked and the Dead* to end.

And naturally one devours the blurbs and the author's bio and picture on the flap jacket. There he was. Black curly hair looking like, to me, someone caught in the cross hairs where he didn't wish to be. He was Brooklyn, Harvard, and Jewish. I was Southern, a reluctant Baptist, and younger. I wanted to be where he was. I tried for Harvard but was shot down as if by Croft. I tried for New York and got in. But before that I served for a year at the Handy Writer's Colony in Southern Illinois where James Jones was ensconced. Mailer came on a famous visit. I see him now in his wire-wheeled red Studebaker, the devastatingly sexy and mute Adele by his side. He hadn't published his second book, *Barbary Shore*, yet. I see him bouncing up and down on the trampoline there, see him flying in the *ramada* in a loose-limbed athletic stride, listen to him tell Hollywood anecdotes in his fast verbal delivery, and hear his chuckle. New York through and through, and where I wanted to be.

After a few years, there I was. And if you were in the writing game back then, in whatever small capacity, you could expect to end up at a George Plimpton party. I met Mailer again. He wore a tie now and was far less relaxed. We spoke briefly about the Handy Colony, Jones, and a few other matters. I could see he was a practiced New York party goer. He moved from person to person and group to group, a drink held at mid-section. I got my first whiff that night that it might not be the easiest thing in the world to be

Norman Mailer. I didn't envy him, but I still stood in awe. Moving on, he called over his shoulder that he would invite me to a party soon in Brooklyn. I never heard from him again. But that night was memorable.

First I heard, "They're at it! Stop 'em!"

Mailer was trading punches with, I later found out, one Doc Humes. Several women around them looked concerned. They were going at it without, it seemed to me, much passion, though—just slinging fists back and forth in some sort of exercise, only a few connecting. Mailer's face was impassive, as if he might be working out a mathematical problem, not having a fight. Both were quickly separated, both resumed drinking, both returned to their party rounds. Everything back to normal. A short time later came thumping sounds from a hallway. "My, God, they're at it again!"

Mailer and Humes were throwing punches out there but the people around them had thinned. Eventually they dusted themselves off, not speaking, and returned to the party. I stayed on because I didn't know the proper time to exit a Plimpton party and, besides, I had nowhere to go except home, an apartment the size of a closet in the Village.

As I walked out I passed Mailer and Humes rolling around on the hallway floor, wrestling and weakly throwing punches that weren't landing and no one stopping them. There was no crowd around. I thought once again that, despite all his fame and accomplishments, it might be tougher than anyone knew to be Norman Mailer.

Thereafter it was a cascade of times that I saw him, sometimes to be introduced afresh, sometimes not, but always an event to me, however slight the moment. There he is heading into K.C. Lee's saloon on Tenth Street, late at night, locking arms with two hot beauties on either side. There he is in the Algonquin in pin-striped suit with vest at noon talking to an editor, but rises to be introduced to me once again by Clay Felker, another interesting man, another story. And then there I am walking across Central Park South on my way to work on Madison Avenue one early morning and Mailer is coming the other way. He obviously hasn't been to sleep and his eyes looked tired. He wears a trench coat loosely tied at the middle. We pass with just the minimum of eye contact. Not even a nod. Then there was the funeral service for Frank Crowther at a small dark chapel in Murray Hill, far from the likes of a Frank Campbell send-off on the upper reaches of Madison. Just a few people there: Joe Flaherty, Mike Macdonald, Frank's father and brother and weeping niece, and Mailer. The coffin was draped in the American flag

because Frank had been a Marine. Frank, an old friend, had been the organizer and promoter of Mailer's Fiftieth Birthday Gala. Mailer, bless him, in a tan short-sleeved safari jacket spoke. He compared Frank to Jay Gatsby who had come to New York with great expectations and left it dead, a broken man. Much later Mailer told me that Frank had sent him a cheery note that said he was about to take a trip and so long, old buddy. He didn't realize at the time that Frank was about to take off forever.

Mailer thrived with a tight coterie around him, most in the literary business but not all of them. He was like a rabbi to them, and to all of us who looked up to him. He had inherited the rabbinic role I suppose from his grandfather who was actually a rabbi. He was never the lonely artist holed up in a garret. He was the most generous of all the acclaimed writers I ever met. He gave out blurbs for first novelists. He talked up promising writers to editors. It may have had disastrous effects occasionally, as with Jack Henry Abbott, but never was his spirit dampened for the new and adventurous and talented. He only bristled and fought back like a maniac when attacked or misunderstood or in competition with his more or less equals or by the less intelligent who held seats of power. And, let it be said, by incompetent copy editors of his prose, as happened during his early *Village Voice* days. He didn't mind, I understand, competent editing. Like Justice Potter Stewart said about pornography, he knew it when he saw it.

The list of those drawn to him is too long to go into but they know who they are. Some go back to his army days when he was an enlisted man in World War II. Some are fans who have just begun to shave. Frankly, I believe most are males. He had more of an adversarial relationship with women due perhaps to the extremes of feminism bursting forth in his lifetime. It seems quaint now thinking of how Germaine Greer and Jill Johnson attacked him. Mailer loved women. The record speaks for itself as he once pointed out to childless Gore Vidal. Look at all his children and grandchildren. His last marriage, to the estimable Norris Church, long and successful, was one many of us would envy.

And so it comes down to Mailer having too much of a life force and talent to be pinned down as simply a novelist. I remember his drawing of a city all encompassed in one fantastic building. He ran for mayor of New York. He was a poet whom Robert Lowell complimented. Another memory of mine is a summer evening in Provincetown when I watched him on stage reading from his poetry. The beat goes on—movie maker, playwright, critic, an

engineering graduate of Harvard, a head butting champion, a man who could take a punch to the belly ... his life was a novel, and it is as a novelist that he first gained fame. If he had continued on in the same vein, as he had in *The Naked and the Dead*, he would have been another Steinbeck or Dos Passos perhaps. He would have silently noted the peculiar and distinct American characters out there whose lives and dramas are seldom recorded and he would have given them their due with art and narrative. But to have done that he would have had to put away the Norman Mailer he became after becoming the Norman Mailer we all know.