LIVING MAILER

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THE DAY HAD ARRIVED FOR ME to tell my ex-wife that my fiancé was pregnant.

"Keep it up, Richard," she said. "You'll be just like Norman."

I took it as a compliment, though I'm not sure that was what she intended.

It occurred to me then, as I walked away from her door, that I not only read Mailer but—for better or worse—I *lived* Mailer. Even before I discovered his work in the late 1960s, and then met him in the winter of 1970–71 in Provincetown, I had lived my life—unconsciously at best, and often intoxicated—according to themes, ideas, precepts, and intuitions we shared, notions Norman not only lived by and articulated, but he examined and illuminated with his unique brilliance in the cold, hard light of the morning after.

This is not to say simply that Mailer had the courage of his convictions, although he had a vast store of challenging beliefs and was the bravest man I ever knew. Yes, he lived by what he believed, as some of us do, or try to; but what Norman did was to consistently test the validity of his ideas in experience, in how he lived life, and then in art, in his prose.

It was his belief, as he wrote in *Ancient Evenings*, "One has to pay a price for magic. Put the colored powder on the sand, but also take a vow to draw your sword next day at the first insult and obey the vow whether the dancing girl brings poverty or pleasure. That is the obligation. Look for the risk. We must obey it every time. There is no credit to be drawn from the virtue of one's past."

Mailer showed us one must pay the price for the magic of great art. And pay … and pay, and ante up all over again each and every day. Great writing, Norman said, could only be achieved by living the life you can't escape.

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To live Mailer then is to inhabit a world of magic. It is to live in a world where there are consequences for everything we do, and everything we fail to do. Mailer's world is imbued by karma, a place where circumstance builds character or corrodes it, and there is no such thing as coincidence. To live Mailer is to enter a world where every scent on the wind has portent, every event has mystery and meaning, and one never gets away with anything. Finally, it is a world where death is not the end but the beginning, a theistic world where God, having created us in His image, is growing, changing, evolving along with us, His greatest creation, given His essence in our immortal souls. This is the magic land of Mailer.

Norman and I arrived in this world from opposite sides of the street and somehow crossed over. He was a Jewish kid from Brooklyn who went to Ivy League Harvard at sixteen, then to war and on to literary fame. I was a rebellious WASP kid from white bread Wellesley, Massachusetts, who went to reform school, became an outlaw and graduated to the penitentiary. In the intellectual realm, we met in some shadowy metaphysical alley where the switchblade is never as sharp or as penetrating as the word, and violence plays out accompanied by jazz and reefer or, in my case, rock and roll and pot.

In his 1957 essay, "The White Negro," first published in *Dissent*, and then reprinted in his collection, *Advertisements for Myself* in 1959—when I was just 13, a post-war baby boomer and nascent juvenile delinquent growing up in the suburbs, where the malling of America was already under way with an architectural blight known as Shopper's World—Mailer defined the life that I had unknowingly embarked upon.

> It is on this bleak scene that a phenomenon has appeared: the American existentialist—the hipster, the man who knows that if our collective condition is to live with instant death by atomic war, relatively quick death by the State as *l'univers concentrationnaire*, or with a slow death by conformity with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled (at what damage to the mind and the heart and the liver and the nerves no research foundation for cancer will discover in a hurry), if the fate of twentieth century man is to live with death from adolescence to premature senescence, why then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce one-

> self from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self. In short, whether the life is criminal or not, the decision is to encourage the psychopath in oneself, to explore that domain of experience where security is boredom and therefore sickness, and one exists in the present, in that enormous present which is without past or future, memory or planned intention, the life where a man must go until he is beat, where he must gamble with his energies through all those small or large crises of courage and unforeseen situations which beset his day, where he must be with it or doomed not to swing. The unstated essence of Hip, its psychopathic brilliance, quivers with the knowledge that new kinds of victories increase one's power for new kinds of perception; and defeats, the wrong kind of defeats, attack the body and imprison one's energy until one is jailed in the prison air of other people's habits, other people's defeats, boredom, quiet desperation, and muted icy self-destroying rage.

By the time we met I had read pretty much everything Mailer had published until then, and to say it resonated would be mumbled understatement. Reading Mailer at 21 and 22 was for me nothing short of a shout-out: a revelation. Now I understood why I was living the rootless criminal life I lived, why I had done and was still doing the insane things I did, taking the chances I took all in an effort to "break out of the barbed-wire cocoon of middle-class life," as he called it in our first literary endeavor together, a long, two-part interview published in *Rolling Stone* magazine, January 2 and January 16, 1975.

"We live in this enormous supermarket of suburban guilt," Norman went on. "Because we know we are all destroying the landscape with our homes and our highways. There's such a gassy, dead dull air over everything. Which we create." And this was long before the concept of global warming had entered the public consciousness.

"I made a certain reputation by breaking the rules," Norman told me in 1974. When I reminded him of his 1959 comment, made in *Advertisements for Myself* that, "The ambition of a writer like myself is to become consecutively more disruptive, more dangerous and more powerful," Norman replied, "I am no longer trying to be disturbing. I've come to a point in my life where

I'm trying to put it together." "It" being his life and his work. He would not try to draw credit from the virtue of his past work. He believed one has to continue to "grow or pay more for remaining the same," as was the guide that came to define his life and his work.

"I felt it's possible that I have as much or more to say than anybody around in American life," he continued in the interview. "That was my confidence. But the painful thing I learned was that it isn't enough to be good, it isn't enough to be right, it isn't enough to have the kind of confidence other people don't have. It is absolutely not enough if you don't really have the discipline to carry your idea out to all its stages including the finished product. And to know how to protect it."

He was speaking of his book *Marilyn*, but could have been talking about any idea or endeavor he would embrace in his life and in his work.

By the time the *Rolling Stone* interview was published, we had become friends and then good, close friends. Norman was one of the best friends I have ever known, and not just to me, to all his friends, no matter the personal cost. In prison parlance, if Mailer was your friend he "had your back." He was there to bear some of your burden. He understood true friendship as something spiritual, above and beyond even familial relationships. One can't choose one's family, but one can and does choose one's friends. And they choose you. Norman knew that a true friend is defined not in terms of how one measures up to the friends one chooses, their good or not so good qualities, but in how one measures up to one's idea of oneself.

In 1982, after a long rootless career outside the law, I was arrested and charged with importing and distributing marijuana and hashish. I went to trial first in federal court in the District of Maine, and then again under the kingpin statute in the Southern District of New York. Norman was there at both trials to testify in my behalf. All through the eight years I spent in prison, after my mother, Norman was my most loyal visitor and correspondent. He read and critiqued my prison writings, and he helped me get my novel *Smack Goddess* published just as I was being released in 1990. He opened his Brooklyn Heights home to me until I was able to find a place of my own. When I married in 1992, Norman was my Best Man. When I divorced in 2005, he was my *consigliere*.

"Rick," he said to me, "I like to think of a marriage as like living for a time in a foreign land. One doesn't want to return from France and remember

only how unpleasant the French can be; one wants to remember the great food and fine wines and the beauty of the language."

If living Mailer meant eschewing the use of contraception, it was not because I read it somewhere in something he wrote, but because it felt better. Then, when I did read what he said about how one has to obey the risk and take responsibility for one's actions or they are meaningless, or at best less meaningful, of course it made sense. It felt better because more was at stake. At both the funeral in Provincetown, and then again at the memorial service at Carnegie Hall, I was struck by the thought: Not only has this man left behind a glorious and profound body of work, but the Mailer gene pool he left in his wake is deep and beautiful and sparkles with talent. Living Mailer meant creating and procreating.

I visited him most days, those final days, as he took his leave. Norman died as he lived—boldly, wide-eyed, curious, ready for the next phase of the great adventure. "I have met God!" he announced at one point. "If this is the afterlife, it's a wild ride."

One got the sense that his vast intelligence and spirit could no longer be contained by mere temporal life. He was moving on to a dimension where it would not be necessary to call him on the phone or visit him on the Cape or in Brooklyn Heights when I felt confused and baffled by experience. He is no longer here, nor there, but everywhere. As Norman wrote of Henry Miller, "He has such an extravagant sense of mission that his presence is palpable." I can commune with him as I move through Mailer-present atmosphere living his ideas.

It was in this context that, after returning from more wayward wandering soon after Norman had departed this plane, I had a *Mailerevelation*, to coin a word for an insight inspired by Norman's thinking. I gave up my cell phone. And I got my inner life back. It was as though I could hear him saying, "Throw that thing away, Rick. It's fucking with your mood, and it may be giving you brain cancer."

"Totalitarianism is the interruption of mood," Norman told us in that *Rolling Stone* interview. "It keeps you with your thumb and forefinger on your prick—including the girls—then we're in that livid state known as pretotalitarianism."

Or with your thumb and forefinger on the keys of your Blackberry, he whispered to me. Nothing profound is ever communicated over a cell phone.

He went on, "Totalitarianism can't succeed if a good proportion of the population is relaxed at any given moment. It requires a state of tension where nobody's relaxed enough to recognize even simple things. At that point you need a massive shock to stimulate you." Like a brain tumor. People don't walk down the street anymore. They have ambulatory inane cell phone conversations and fail to recognize even their friends.

Ah, Norman, I heard you whispering in my ear when the dancing girl brought pleasure and I didn't withdraw. I obeyed the risk. And a magic child, Ivan Judah Stratton was conceived.