

THE BLUE HOUR

M I C H A E L L . S H U M A N

Mornings with Mailer

By Dwayne Raymond

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Norman Mailer's boundless curiosity and passionate intellect led him around the world as he researched material for his published work. He was an eminently social man, enjoying nothing more than good company and time well-spent with engaging friends. Dwayne Raymond's memoir, *Mornings with Mailer*, presents the author during the final years of his life, primarily confined to Provincetown and to the routines of his home at 627 Commercial Street.

Raymond served as Mailer's aide from April 2003 until the author's death on November 10, 2007. During that time he organized Mailer's research for *The Castle in the Forest*, helped out with the assembly of *The Big Empty* and *On God: An Uncommon Conversation*, and gave Mailer the notion for *Modest Gifts*, a small paperback collecting the author's drawings and poetry. Raymond also ran errands, prepared meals, coordinated Mailer's interview schedule, and otherwise made sure that Mailer's active creative life was only marginally restricted by age and illness.

The prospect of managing a cooped-up Mailer might be daunting, but according to Raymond, Mailer accepted his situation with humor, grace, and perhaps uncharacteristic silence. "Norman understood that the bastard edge of age fostered limitations," he writes, "and he knew I knew that—why discuss the obvious? It made for better days to let some topics fritter away unaddressed." Deep in the process of writing *Castle*, titled after the inmates'

nickname for a Nazi concentration camp, Mailer himself was a prisoner of his infirmities, but his acceptance of his condition was fostered, perhaps, by a fascination both with freedom and restriction. He famously championed the release of Jack Henry Abbot in 1981, mapped the psychology of Gary Gilmore in *The Executioner's Song*, was a *Prisoner of Sex*, and during the final months of his life, energetically planned to direct an adaptation of *The Deer Park* emphasizing confinement and routine. "He intended it to be an avant-garde work," Raymond explains, "set in a theatre where the actors, in an unknowing hell, were doomed to repeat the play for eternity." Indeed, throughout his earlier, active life Mailer was no stranger to confinement, and saw his role of celebrity-writer as much restricting as liberating. As Raymond notes, "[w]hat most do not realize is that a writer is working even when he or she is seemingly at rest. He once noted to me that being a writer was much like being a prisoner serving a life sentence. Norman was always, always working."

Raymond's account of Mailer's working days is alone fascinating for the small details surrounding the habits and quirks of this singular personality. We learn that Mailer loathed broccoli and misquotations, folded pages in books and magazines lengthwise to mark them, exercised two hours each day to prevent his weakened legs from deteriorating further. He was a sucker for come-on ads shilling dubious products and luxuriated in his "Second Office," the downstairs bathroom where he considered "'highly significant statistics about football or the latest idiocy of the Red Sox.'" Among the many insights gained during his association with Mailer, Raymond mentions his realization that "ignored moments are often the most vital, the ones that should be banked. Most of us fail to pay respect to those tiny threads that are the fabric. I vowed to not make that mistake any longer." And indeed, Raymond honors this pledge as he tracks the minutia surrounding Mailer's hours and days.

Raymond's command of the kitchen and Mailer's gastronomic eccentricities, minor details perhaps ignored by other observers, emerge as unifying threads of the memoir. Raymond was hired following an encounter in a Provincetown market, with Raymond's polite greeting and Mailer's sly inspection of the contents of the younger man's grocery basket. Their discussion may have been about writing, but Mailer's implied intention was to engage someone to cook for the family, distinguished guests, and local cronies gathering at the Mailer household for the weekly game of poker.

We find Mailer, always the creator, coming up with recipes involving baby peas and green beans, often laced with teriyaki, or using his experience as an army cook to dictate just the right way to roast a chicken, or fabricating the supreme *Berry Trio*, “a mixture of raspberries, blueberries and chopped strawberry mixed into a sauce of clover honey and the juice from half a lemon.” Other fun culinary facts: Mailer adored Dove bars, served guests high and low with meatloaf, and contemplated appearing on *The Martha Stewart Show* because the host sometimes featured cooking. Food, too, served as a means of conjuring up Mailer’s memories of the places he had visited and the times before his comparative confinement. Raymond describes Mailer’s nearly fanatical sketch of a receipt for borscht, a dish he had prepared during his visit to Minsk while researching *Oswald’s Tale*. Concerned about finding just the right type of beet for a proper stew, Mailer apparently was channeling his experience in Russia to enlarge his life in Provincetown. “I was beginning to understand that Norman thought about food as often as he contemplated man’s reason for existence,” Raymond notes, “—which was all the time.”

The reader also learns a little bit about The Norman Mailer Society, its meetings in Provincetown during the author’s lifetime, and much about Provincetown itself, a small, diverse community welcoming artists, gays, and tourists alike. If you have visited Provincetown or, in fact, even watched *Tough Guys Don’t Dance*, the movie of Mailer’s novel filmed there in 1987, you will recognize the Little Bar, the Provincetown Inn, Michael Shay’s, and The Lobster Pot, where Mailer drives to, solo, one final time in order to reassert his independence. As Raymond describes, Mailer immersed himself into the community as a regular guy, just one of the town’s citizens, never claiming superiority despite his distinguished accomplishments. “Norman was famous around town for being ‘normal’ in spite of [his] distinctions, and his laissez-fair attitude defined his true local legend. He never sequestered himself or thought himself superior because he was a celebrity.”

Raymond’s observation of Mailer’s habits and working routines, his earned understanding of the man’s thoughts and desires, eventually condenses into something very like a psychic union, and Raymond misses few opportunities to cite the spooky nature of their connection. The market trip leading to his employment with Mailer is represented as a causeless whim rather than a legitimate need for groceries, a propitious intuition rather than mundane event. Raymond at one point shouts at Mailer, “I’m not in your

head!” as Mailer tries to explain, in sparse terms, the changes he wants made to *Gifts*. But Raymond spends much of his memoir showing that, in fact, he *was* in Mailer’s head for many of the one-thousand mornings the two spent together. Mailer himself appears to have knowledge unfounded by experience: “he simply knew things. I don’t know how, but he did.” Mailer was a bit superstitious about discussing their bond, somehow fearful that, verbalized, it would vanish. “I had never given much weight to the belief that two minds, clearly of different caliber, could rock along in comfortable tandem,” Raymond writes. “The odd communication that we shared, which Norman likened to telepathy, seemed more delicate now, more important, yet we still avoided discussion of the phenomenon as little as possible.”

The memoir ultimately tells the reader as much about Raymond as about Mailer, becoming the autobiography of an aspiring author tethered by one resoundingly-influential cultural personality. We learn about Raymond’s eventual disgust with serving meals to New England tourists, his agonizing relationship with his companion, Thomas, and his grandfather’s rural ways. We learn, along with Raymond, about his father’s suicide and his need to find a substitute father in Mailer, along with a replacement family in Mailer’s large clan. But we are left with remarkable gaps, too, as we piece together Raymond’s story: a frequent visitor of Provincetown’s Little Bar early in the narrative, Raymond later describes himself as alcohol-free for eighteen months, going off the wagon only to salute Mailer on his deathbed. We’re introduced to Christina Pabst as someone with the potential to impact Raymond’s life, only to find that she is mentioned just twice in the text. These oversights may be stylistic imperfections rather than intentional sidesteps, but the reader is left wondering about the reasons for Raymond’s sobriety and the motivation for presenting Christina in such an auspicious light.

Raymond’s narrative is most effective as he recounts the transformations experienced by the two most important men in his life. Thomas, separated from Raymond during much of the narrative, comes to recognize his true identity and commits to life as transsexual, leaving Raymond with feelings of “unimaginable ambiguity.” Raymond’s sense of abandonment leads him to question the nature of sexual identity: “Thomas was not a male in the precise sense of the word and never had been—he’d simply appeared to be a perfect example of one.” Mailer, Raymond’s mentor and, along with Hemmingway, perhaps the quintessential literary spokesman for masculinity, slowly succumbs to the infirmities of age. Mailer eventually stops play-

ing his morning games of solitaire, visits his attic workplace less frequently, and perhaps most poignantly, begins to suffer from aphasia, the momentary lapse in finding and speaking just the right word. Mailer forgets where he had placed revised manuscripts and fails to recognize an oatmeal dish he had added to Raymond's menu. "His once splendid love of food," Raymond laments, "had become like the fond memory of an object he'd put in a cabinet and now thought about only rarely."

Raymond's account of Mailer's final years may suffer, as Raymond himself implies, from a distorted perspective due to his close relationship with the author and, perhaps, insufficient time to put relationships and events into proper context. "Like a young wine that hasn't matured," he confesses, "my years with [Mailer] have yet to find their smoothness. There is too much to flesh out, too much rendering yet to be done." But readers are left with an engaging portrait of a literary lion testing the bars of his cage, still committed to assembling the big picture from life's minor details, even in relative confinement.

Mailer's devoted wife of more than thirty years, Norris, has special affection for the evening view of the bay from the lanai of 627 Commercial Street and for what she calls the Blue Hour, that "fleeting stretch of evening when the water and sky glowed sapphire and burgundy, just before the sun dipped down." Raymond's success is that he communicates, with warmth and detail, Mailer's own Blue Hour and the power and creativity possible for every person, even in decline.