

NORMAN MAILER AT FIRST LIGHT

D . A . P E N N E B A K E R

THE FIRST TIME I MET NORMAN MAILER, really met and talked with him, was in the mid-sixties in a bar just across the street from the Theater de Lys where a dramatized version of his *Deer Park* was in rehearsals. With him at the bar were two fierce-looking fellows, one had a familiar sort of face, and the other looked like a bodyguard. The three of them were inventing or rehearsing a kind of dramatic exchange which I thought might be part of Norman's book-turned-play. But having read the book I knew it was not that. The three were yelling and threatening one another like hoodlums in a street brawl, with only myself and a deserted morning bar for an audience.

I had gotten a call to meet Mailer here but not told why. My partner, Ricky Leacock, had been a classmate of his at Harvard and we had run into him at film showings but I don't think I was ever introduced. Why he called me was a mystery; I didn't think that he knew my name. And the fracas-taking place before me was even more of a mystery. Was he casting something?

Mailer stopped shouting and turned to look at me.

I waited for him to speak, being a little confused and not sure what I was doing here.

"You're Pennebaker," he said in a completely normal voice.

"Yes."

He introduced me to his two companions, Mickey Knox, an actor, and Buzz Farber, who was almost always by his side.

He asked if I wanted a drink. It was still early but I said "Yea—a beer."

The three of them appeared completely normal, with no hint of the wild tumult that had been taking place. I was handed a beer and Norman lounged back on his stool and spoke.

"We've been doing this thing you just saw a lot recently. We go into bars and do fights or wild conversations and let whatever happens happen. You

can see it's brutal but when we get it right it's going some place. We're the Gallo brothers, now. We've been hiding out."

The Gallos had been in the news a lot recently. I recalled them being involved in the Colombo crime family struggles. The thing that was strange was that they had been talking in no particular accent or even style. They didn't try to sound like members of an Italian crime family. They weren't enacting characters; they just were putting themselves into a made up fantasy situation and running with it.

He leaned forward towards me.

"What I want to do is film it. I want to make a movie about it and I don't need a script, just a mic to catch what we say, and a camera to see what happens, but there's no director, just a camera. And me." He paused.

"I hear you and Ricky make films like that about things that happen, You have cameras and tape recorders and you just film things. Is that right?"

We had and I said we did.

"I hear one of your films is playing in a theater, yes?"

I nodded my head but didn't mention that it was in a porn house in San Francisco.

"Well, what do you think?" He got off his stool and began moving around, like a prizefighter walking around a ring.

"We're going to be these three guys hiding out in Brooklyn and what we do all day is ride each other and maybe drink some. I don't know about drinking—we'll have to figure that out. But we need some kind of room, or maybe a loft to do it in, can you get that?"

This was an idea Ricky and I'd been thinking about for a while. A narrative film (Fiction) but shot the way we were shooting documentaries: no tripods, no lights, just handheld cameras, and no director, or at least no one directing the camera except the cameraman, and he would be filming whatever interested him. We were not necessarily sure how the action was going or the story playing out.

I said I could and we did.

That was how the whole film thing with Norman began. Three guys playing they were the Gallo brothers in one of our empty offices on Forty-Fifth street, with Bobby Neuwirth taking sound, which in that empty room was not too hot and my watching Norman and his two friends for hours while they played at being ex-members of the Columbo family. If they had they known what was going on they might easily have joined the party or maybe

blown us out of the water. Who knew or cared about the Colombo crime family? We were inventing movies.

At the end, when exhaustion determined the film's ending, Norman came over to the camera and did something which I will never forget, something that bonded us as long as we knew each other and remains my most vivid memory of him. He faced up to the front of the camera and began turning around so that to keep him in the finder I had to go round with him, and as he turned he began reciting a poem, not a poem I knew, but a poem he was making up as he went round, a poem made up like the movie we had just finished. It was the first time I had ever filmed someone making up a poem in front of me. It was an amazing place to be with a camera and it is how I will always remember Norman.