

WHAT NORMAN MAILER TAUGHT ME ABOUT COMBAT

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NORMAN MAILER OWES ME ONE. This statement rings worthy of Mailer's own limitless chutzpah, but I figure I have a right. I base this calculation on a brief encounter I had with him at long-ago dinner party. Despite Mailer's reputation as a fighter and scoundrel, I sensed a simple, masculine justice to his character: That is, I hit you, you hit me back, so we're even, and now we can be friends. I could be wrong, but I think that he, a former boxer and soldier, appreciated a fair fight.

I didn't meet this hell-raising literary standout on a social basis. As a chronically broke student, I supplemented my scholarship with a variety of temporary jobs—working as an *au pair*, a library clerk, a Chinese food delivery person, a tutor, and once as a model for a hair styling magazine. While some students at the expensive school I attended lived off trust funds and their parents' credit cards, most of my friends held part-time jobs. I was excited one weekend to snag a well-paying, Saturday night waitressing gig through my college's jobs' board. The listing described a need for a server for an "exclusive dinner party *cum* political discussion with several well-known novelists in attendance."

It was the promise of meeting real writers that attracted me to the position. I anticipated a modern version of the *salon*, those elegant affairs so crucial to nineteenth century culture. I looked forward to eavesdropping on the conversation, which was bound to be brilliant, witty, and profound. Perhaps those assembled might even include me in their conversations, while for my part I might find an opportunity to quote off-handedly a Shakespearean quatrain or a few trenchant lines from Yeats. "It's obvious you have a gift for

language,” one of the distinguished guests would say. “You must send me something you have written.”

In short, I was that creature most dreaded by established authors, an aspiring writer, green as lettuce. I probably deserved what happened.

In high school, I had written my first two short stories, which subsequently won two first prizes in *Scholastic Magazine’s* fiction contest. That unexpected coup led to a full scholarship to Barnard in New York City. I had grown up in rural Pennsylvania with my parents and twelve brothers and sisters. In the Upper West Side of Manhattan, during the Koch years, we faced a fairly drastic change of pace.

At college, many professors encouraged my ambitions. “You have a depth to your writing that many older writers would envy,” one teacher told me. Another professor, no slouch of a writer herself, praised my “genius for description.” When my philosophy professor (author of the standard introductory textbook on the subject), handed back our first papers, he announced that there was only one philosopher in the class and only one promising writer. On my paper he’d scrawled, “This isn’t philosophy but you can write. Best of luck”

On the other hand, some people were far less enthusiastic about my creations. With carefully shielded pride, I showed a story to a teacher whose seminar I hoped to join. As a child I had read and admired, in a *Reader’s Digest* condensed volume, this woman’s saga of her Armenian relatives, owners of a restaurant in Queens. She scanned the first pages, then remarked that only James Joyce was allowed to write in the stream-of-consciousness style. Cringing dog that I was, I found myself agreeing with her completely.

It didn’t help matters that I suffered in my youth from what is now labeled a “social anxiety disorder,” coupled with masochist tendencies. I was so thin-skinned as to be nearly transparent, so shy that I wrote lists of interesting conversational topics before leaving my dorm room. Just as praise for my work could elate me to a dangerous degree, criticism too easily flustered me and made me doubt myself.

During one writing class, a professor distributed, without naming the author, a piece that I had written. Her private opinion of the work was favorable, but she allowed my peers to offer their feedback first. Looking back, I have a memory of my fellow English majors at my all-girls college, an irritable group at best, eviscerating the story. One girl, whose t-shirt slogan instructed Pope John Paul to keep his rosaries off her ovaries, took particular

umbrage. “Invalid, stultifying negation of “herstory” . . . obviously derived from patriarchal white-male, so-called “classical” literature, were some of the gentler phrases she used. Another student, who, within ten years, would marry a cardiologist and settle in Scarsdale, damned the anonymous writer both for being an undercover male and a reactionary. I mounted a feeble defense of certain passages I knew were decently written, but by the end of the class, I found myself if not agreeing with, at least not objecting to, the general condemnation.

It took me years to learn how to distinguish objective, helpful criticism from personal bias, years to develop enough calluses to survive a writer’s life, and by that time, I had pretty much stopped writing.

That Saturday night dinner party, back in the 1980s, when Norman Mailer was in his rascally prime, was held at the spacious Central Park West apartment of a political writer known for his unapologetic Marxist views. The host was gathering a trio of famous authors—Bernard Malamud, Kurt Vonnegut, and Mailer—along with their wives to discuss how best to achieve worldwide nuclear disarmament. In the giddy pre-party moments, as I set the table and tried to calm myself down after hearing Malamud’s name, the hostess, a well-upholstered, fortyish brunette, spoke warmly to me about the evening ahead. “So you’re at *Bar-nard*, how *wonderful* . . . and an aspiring writer yourself, excellent . . . well, we have some very important people coming in tonight, I’ll be sure to introduce you.”

But when the illustrious guests showed up, my hostess’ tone turned a little snappish, and her promise of personal introductions did not materialize. In fact, she suddenly misplaced my name and began referring to me as “you,” as in “I’d so appreciate it if you’d hang up the wraps a bit more carefully,” and “Would you mind hurrying with those drinks?”

The evening progressed, although not quite as planned. Malamud, whose luminescent stories still captivate me, seemed something of a fusspot, several times complaining of a stomachache. Supervised by an anxious Mrs. Malamud, he suffered through his meal, declining most of the food and all of the alcohol offered to him. The other attendees, however, more than made up for his abstention. A gloomy Vonnegut gulped Scotch while lighting the tip of one Pall Mall from another, pinching the butts out on his Havilland plate. By the end of the soup course, those in attendance appeared to have abandoned any thoughts of collaborating on an anti-nuclear treatise. The conversation had drifted to other, less global concerns. I recall a few malicious tidbits

involving mutual enemies and some personal chat about families. I hadn't yet lost hope that the writers would start providing me with fresh insight into Proust, or elaborating on the major themes of Russian literature in the last century.

Norman Mailer, possibly out of boredom, perhaps to exhibit solidarity with the working class, abruptly stood up, picked up his soup bowl, and followed me out of the dining room. Norman's wife rolled her beautiful eyes. "Oh Norman, don't bother, the girl can handle that," protested the hostess as we exited.

In the kitchen, where the chef was plating the fish course, I thanked Mailer for his help, and he politely introduced himself. He then asked me my name, and when I told him "Erin Bridget Kelley," his face brightened and he squared off in front of me, asking in an atrocious brogue, "Hey, Erin, do ye happen to know what an oxymoron is?"

I was about to tell him that of course I did, that I was an English/classics major, who could explicate *The Good Morrow* and had translated *The Symposium* from the Greek. But before I could answer, the literary lion burst out, grinning like a bratty ten-year-old boy. "A sober Irishman! That's an oxymoron for you!"

I was too startled to reply and instead blushed to the parting in my hair, a vexing physiological reaction that had plagued me since eighth grade. The man seemed disappointed when I wouldn't insult him back in kind. A couple of times during the rest of the evening, Mailer tried to catch my eye and include me in the conversation, but I, stiff-necked and ashamed to be looked on as a servant by these people, celebrated novelists or not, refused to look in his direction.

In those days, I was reticent about speaking my mind, prone to what the French call *l'esprit d'escalier*, or "staircase wit." To me, the phrase connoted the quick, cutting reply, the clever argument dreamed up on the subway ride home after a party, all the words that I ought to have said. While climbing the stairs to my room, I'd regret not having had the perfect comeback to silence the know-it-all, the bully or the Nosey Parker. I should have jousted with Mailer in kind, countered his insult with a "Hey, wise guy, is 'a well-mannered Norman Mailer' an oxymoron, too?"

I'd like to think that Mailer could take it as well as he could dish it out. But it would take me years to learn to speak my mind, to respond quickly to

verbal challenges. That night, I was way too young, way too touchy and self-conscious.

Still, in time I realized that Norman Mailer had taught me some things through our little exchange. First, I learned to avoid meeting icons in person, as they are bound to disappoint you. Second, whatever my opinion of Mailer's many crusades, I had to admire his blunt and outspoken style, the great faith in himself he had to produce not only a new kind of literature in *The Executioner's Song*, but also works stunning for their epic length—almost fifteen hundred pages on the CIA, almost a thousand on ancient Egypt. Whatever Mailer did or didn't do, he did one thing consistently right and that was to take his talent as a writer seriously. I can't imagine him ever letting anyone sneer at his work.

After graduation from college, I started off determined to write. For a year, I lived alone aboard a Chris-Craft on the Potomac in Washington, DC. I supported myself with temporary office jobs, writing at night in the boat's galley. At that time, my work-in-progress was a lengthy "fictional" account of two young girls, one of them a double for my younger sister Lizzie. The older girl, Molly, bore striking similarities to me. Coincidentally, the children were members of a large, Irish-Catholic family, and were growing up in the Pennsylvania countryside. The girls enjoyed visiting their lovable old coot of a neighbor, Mr. Welliver, who warmed his dentures in a jar that he set on the old-fashioned coal stove. The old man was notable for the multitude of feral cats living under his back porch. The story kept going on and on, stretching to more than one hundred pages, and I hadn't even managed to lure the children from Mr. Welliver's yard. The girls alternated between fashioning bouquets of Queen's Anne's lace, whose flowers reminded Molly of "the chaplet her mother wore to Mass," and chasing the increasingly frenzied kittens around the property. Meanwhile, that quaint old dear, Mr. Welliver, had fallen asleep on page twenty-seven, while watching a Phillies game. By page one hundred and twelve, I could have gladly killed off both my main characters in as gruesome a manner as was credible. Fortunately, this particular manuscript has been lost to time.

When I got the chance to join a six-week scientific expedition to Maine aboard a Smithsonian research vessel, I took it. It seemed like a writerly thing to do. Eventually, I moved back to New York and began working in the textbook division of Harper & Row. Soon enough, I set sail again, this time to Ireland for a year, having enrolled in courses in Anglo-Irish literature. I had

a great time tramping the same streets as the characters in *Dubliners*, and visiting Stephen Daedalus's tower in Dunlaoghaire. *Ulysses* finally made sense to me, thanks to the Trinity lectures, but I ran out of tuition money, and finished up the year working at a pub.

When I returned stateside, I moved in with my brother Michael in Boston. I was accepted into Boston University's M.F.A. program, but chose instead to move to Maine and get married. For the next several years, I kept writing, kept holding on to the idea that writing was my true vocation. At that point, I believed that with steady, honest work and some luck, recognition for my work would come. In the spring of 1993, I was deep into a work of fiction that I believed to be the best that I had done. I had recently received a friendly, handwritten note from the managing editor at *The Atlantic Monthly*, rejecting a story I had sent in, while encouraging me to send him more work. I was thirty-three, my wanderlust at last satisfied. I was grateful for my marriage, and my beautiful sons, confident that I would fulfill my writer's destiny, and eventually get on paper what I needed to say. Yet I couldn't seem to carry out these plans when the boys were small.

A few years ago, I taught myself to paint in oils, hoping that creating art in another medium might somehow lead me back to writing. Instead, I found I loved painting. Where my writing seemed more effective when it was sad, my best canvases were happy and high-keyed in tone. I've exhibited in solo and group shows, and sold a respectable number of paintings. This year, I was awarded a grant from the Pennsylvania Partners in the Arts, through the Scranton Foundation, to create a series of portraits.

Although I have since run into other well-known people, among them Tolstoy's grandnephew, Maud Gonne's son Sean MacBride, and George Steinbrenner (bizarre bedfellows, I admit), I retain a fondness for the memory of my quick exchange with Norman Mailer. Out of all those big shots at that dinner party, he had looked me in the eye and spoken to me as if I were a real human being. Maybe he could sense that I, like him, didn't appreciate being bossed around, even though I had signed up for the job and had only myself to blame.

I hadn't thought about that chance meeting in years. Last week, I attended the Wilkes University Graduate information session, which was presented by a young playwright, who mentioned that he was research assistant for a professor who was writing a biography of Mailer. The mention of Mailer's name recalled to me that distant, almost forgotten memory.

Suddenly, present and past converged. It was as if Mailer were challenging me again. Maybe I have an answer for him now. I'm Irish enough to recognize portents. I'm enough of a believer in the spirit world that I might think it just possible that that bellicose genius, that fearless s.o.b., Norman Kingsley Mailer, might be giving me a shout out from wherever he is now. His exaggerated life, sprawling across nine decades, seems too enormous, too gaudy and messy, to be completely contained by death. I'd prefer to think there's a chance that he's signaling me to show some gumption, to answer back for once. Art itself is the only real response to a ruthless world. Call it hubris, but could Mailer's ghost be prodding me to follow his hyperbolic example, to write down what I have to say before it is too late, before the party ends, the whole battle's done, and it's all over for me? After all, Mr. Mailer does owe me a chance to answer him back.