A VIEW THROUGH THE PRISM

MATTHEW MAILER

I USED TO IMAGINE WHAT LIFE WOULD HAVE BEEN if my mother had never gone to a dinner party thrown by Van and Ginnie Tyson, the fateful night where she met Norman Mailer. Mom used to muse on this as well from time to time and would always come to the same conclusion; she'd be teaching art at Arkansas Tech and I'd have been an artist of some sort, "Or, we'd be living in Massachusetts and I would have met Norman anyway," she would often add. Having filled out an application to Mass Art in Boston, she never sent it after meeting Norman. Mom believed in karma and reincarnation—she really felt there was something to it—and my fate was intertwined with hers back in the days when she was newly divorced from my father Larry Norris and we were living alone, just the two of us.

Memories of those early days in Arkansas come back to me as one might recall a dream, half forgotten with the passing hours of the day. I recall sharing a waterbed with my mother in a brick home along a stretch of highway, a weeping willow in our back yard, and I waiting on the front steps for my father to pick me up for the weekend and playing at my grandparents, James and Gaynell Davis, (Mama and Papa). Mom and I moved quite often, wherever she found work, so I never grew attachments to any house we occupied. Home for me was 303 avenue 3; my Mama and Papa's house and that's where I was left at age five for several months when Mom took off for New York to see if she could set up a life for herself with Norman.

I was used to being dropped off with my grandparents when Mom had to work, or the occasional overnight when she needed "adult" time, so her departure was not as crushing as one might think, softened even further by toys and sweets my Grandmother would spoil me with. I started kindergarten and made friends with the neighborhood kids. It felt like a life there and my mother could have been on the moon as far as I could conceive it.

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She would call often and tell me how wonderful New York was and how much I was going to love it. She sent me cards of old monster movie posters, a note or two on the back (Even at that age I had a love for monsters, Frankenstein and the Mummy among my favorites.) Mom would blame it on her addiction to a horror soap opera called "Dark Shadows" while pregnant with me). My Grandparents would have happily kept me if Mom asked them to. Many years later I was told my grandfather approached my father about trying to keep me in Arkansas, but courts favored the mother in most divorce cases back then. She came back and we flew to New York City.

Mom used to talk about the process of writing as shining one's memory and experience like a beam of light through the prism of imagination, bending and changing as it's redirected and colored with spectrum. My first experience in New York at that young age was a transformative one, and my memories of this time are as scattered as light though a prism. Images come back as moments and remembered emotions: staring at the city lights through the window of a cab on our way to Brooklyn from the airport and seeing Norman's home for the first time. It was night and the apartment was lit with red, green and yellow party lights, emphasizing the circus-like atmosphere. The place was designed to resemble a ship's galley; fish nets and other nautical mementos were hung in the many nooks and corners of the space. The top floor loft boasted a trapeze, a swing, two climbing ropes, ladders, cat walks and a hammock slung across the upper levels. We spent the night there and the next morning I explored the apartment, imagining it to be a pirate ship overlooking the East River.

We didn't move in with Norman right away, Mom and I took a one-bedroom apartment two blocks away on Willow street. I soon met the rest of Norman's children at a family gathering. It was a frightening experience as an only child, coddled by my grandparents, now being one of eight, and two years later nine. My brother Stephan recalls meeting me the first time and my hiding behind Mom's legs on introduction to the rest of the Mailer clan. I would often call out "Mother!" for her attention, Stephen thought I was calling her "Heather" because of my thick southern accent. The rest of the Mailer kids called her "Barb," and later I, too, took to calling her "Barb," trying my best to fit in. This went on for some time before one night Mom broke down and began crying. It had hurt her feelings and she let me know it. I must have been around seven or eight and I made my mother cry, it was such a powerful impression. I trained myself to call her "Mom" and have

ever since. It was a transformative time for my mother as well. She began a modeling career, signing with the Wilhelmina agency. She took vocal classes to lose her southern accent (I still have cassette tapes of her repeating: "How now brown cow?" over and over again). I lost my southern drawl naturally, after being relentlessly teased by my two older stepbrothers. Mom also changed her name from "Barbara Jean Norris" to Norris Church Mailer, but went only by "Norris" as her professional name. All this caused great confusion with anyone whom I was introduced to as Matthew Norris (I still had my father's name). I found myself trying to explain to those scratching their heads why I had a different last name than my mother and why my mother's first name was the same as my last name. Later, at age fourteen I would take Mailer as my last name and Norris as a middle name, another attempt to assimilate into the Mailer clan.

The first two years living in New York was a hard transition. My mother was the only reference I had as to who I was and where I came from and at ages five through seven I had no sense of belonging. She was a life raft for me and I did cling on for quite a while. I recall Mom and Norman going out often, she in any number of stunning evening gowns and Norman in his tux, looking like a couple out of a fairy tale. On those evenings, two or three times a week, the homesickness would hit me and I felt abandoned, an empty pit in my stomach. I never had angry feelings toward my mother, but sadness and a sense of being displaced. Mom was young, making a splash in New York society on Norman's arm. I don't blame her, but looking back at photographs of myself during that period, I see a somber, distant child. I withdrew and tried to become invisible, Mom described me as a "quiet and serious" child, always hiding away in my room creating stories, drawing, or making up games.

My younger brother John Buffalo was soon born and I quickly incorporated him into my fantasy world, creating role playing games, turning a cardboard box and a roll of tinfoil into a suit of armor, dressing him up as a knight, playing G.I. Joe together or making our own movies with the video camera. On the nights she and Norman weren't out on the town, Mom would make the best dinners, pot roast and roast chicken being among Norman's favorites (his Mother Fanny taught her how to make a great roast). We would always eat at nine o'clock; that's when Norman would come home from his studio. He claimed that he got his best writing done in the early evening. Mom created a warm home for all of us. She was the glue that held

Norman's far-flung family together by creating a real home at that crazy bachelor pad I remember walking into at five years old. She and Norman would still go out often, but I'd grown indifferent. I was old enough to babysit John and our parents' night out just meant we got to order pizza and watch movies. I've never known Mom to have many regrets, and if she had her life to live over she wouldn't change a thing, except to spend a little more time with John and me. After her death, I came across a letter she'd written to John: "I wish I'd spent more time with you boys instead of going to all those stupid cocktail parties." Time flies by so fast. Now that I have two children of my own, I understand my mother more now than I ever have before. I don't know a single parent that doesn't question, in some way, if they are good enough.

In 1999, my mother was diagnosed with cancer. I think I took the news with a heavy dose of denial. She did get better after surgery and grueling chemotherapy treatments. Four years later the cancer came back, just before her fifty-fourth birthday. She and Norman were planning a big party for the both of them, (they shared the same birthday and it would be his eightieth). I remember Norman calling and telling me the news, That old empty feeling in the pit of my stomach came back like a punch in the gut. It was different this time, and the prognosis was not good. I was losing my Mother again, but in a real sense. I went to Mass General Hospital where she was scheduled for a last ditch surgery, I was told that the cancer had spread so much that there was only a one in one hundred chance that she would even make it out of the operating room. I arrived the weekend before the rest of the family and spent all Sunday saying goodbye to her. I sat at her bedside and she confessed some indiscretions she'd had while married to my father, Larry, and I confessed that he had told me about it years ago and I'd kept it to myself. She said she was sorry for leaving me when I was small, a guilt she carried with her for so long. I reassured her that I wouldn't trade her for anyone in the world. "You have to let me go," she told me. I never thought of myself as holding on to my mother any more than any son might, but there was a tone in her voice that said, "It's time you grow up now." I was still trying to find myself at the time and she was probably right. The rest of the family arrived and, on the morning of the surgery, we all lined up to give her a hug and say goodbye, an odd feeling—waiting in line to say goodbye to one's mother. I'm not religious in any organized sense, but I prayed in my own way all that day. Miraculously, she came through the surgery and lived

another seven years. In those years she had left, Mom finished a novel and a memoir, attended my wedding and got to know her two grandchildren, Mattie James and Jackson Kingsley. I'm grateful for those years.

We never had a cathartic talk about her uprooting me from Arkansas. A part of her felt I harbored some resentment, no matter how I tried to convince her otherwise. For better or worse, I wouldn't be who I am today if not for my mother's lovestruck encounter with Norman. I sometimes think what life for my mother would have been if she had another twenty or so years to live. I've no doubt she would have had a long career as an author in her own right, apart from Norman. I sometimes look at my daughter Mattie, and see so much of my mother in her. She's a beautiful, precocious five-year-old who wants to be an artist and already has a modeling credit under her belt. Mattie was particularly manic once when Mom was over for a visit, prancing around and not listening. Mom recalled the time when she had won the "Little Miss Little Rock" contest at age three and refused to leave the spotlight after being applauded for her win. She had to be chased around the stage before being dragged away. "Sorry," she said, "I think she gets it from me."