

SISTER MAILER

RUDY LANGLAIS

SHE WAS SINGING THE BLUES WHEN I FIRST MET HER, literally, belting out country folk blues one New Year's Eve, in the middle of a snowstorm that bound all of us to the Brooklyn Heights apartment on Columbia Heights, likes of Barbara Walters and Harold Conrad.

I don't recall the song now, lost in that snowy night almost thirty years ago, but in the tradition of the best blues belters—Sarah, Ella, Nina, Big Mama Thornton—Sister Mailer, as I began calling her, understood the song, understood that it had to be growled not from lyrics but up from some deep source of love, hurt, forgiveness, hope.

She really understood the blues. That they were both painful and joyful: "I lived, loved and hurt—but I'll love again."

Before the loving again, there was the living and loving. So there she was by Norman's side, at a reception I was hosting in Beverly Hills for Russian poet Yevtushenko, trailing the Champ like the "whisperer" on the shoulder of Roman generals, cautioning the hero, "All glory is fleeting, fool!"

But he crashed on in, hearing the whispering voice, sat down next to the feminist filmmaker working on a film based on his Henry Miller script, and then was heard to shout across the room, "Women think I'm a sexist pig, but look at the woman I'm with! I'm pussy-whipped, I'm pussy-whipped!"

He may in fact have been. Sister Mailer certainly towered over him and sang better, and certainly understood the blues more deeply.

Sang them on a Hell's Kitchen street corner one afternoon after a particularly rancorous performance of the pussy-whipped Norman's production of *Strawhead*, when her rage came crashing down on his head like so many Tyson left hooks over his direction of her in the play.

And she brush-stroked that sound for the eyes into paint on a canvas that immortalized our dying friend, Mara Conrad, as a showgirl of Broadway,

dying of cancer but living it all to the end with her Harold, who was also pussy-whipped. And Sister Mailer understood her pain and sang it into the paint and into the canvas and now Mara Conrad lives, forever, in that sound that only women who sing the blues can utter.

Nina sang, "There was a time, I can't remember when. / The house was full of love / But then again it might have been imagination's plan, / Just to help along, one single woman."

Sister Mailer understood.

And so she was there that night that Norman had settled his accounts and was gone. Went up to bed early wracked by grief, pain, hurt, fatigue—empty of everything, and then reappeared and struck out for the piano and began singing, no—shouting, no, growling . . . her song, long into the night, so that he likely heard her up on that hill where he was intruding in the dust.

She was still singing.

I still hear her