The Blood of the Blunt



Norman Mailer

"The Blood of the Blunt," a short story by Norman Mailer, was never published. It is not known with certainty when Mailer wrote the story, but its date of composition is believed to be circa 1951. A transcription of the story follows the images. The Norman Mailer estate has graciously given permission to reprint the story. Images are courtesy of the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

Phillip Sipiora

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Yet it was not large enough for the husband and wife to sleep side by side. Under an accumulation of what was sore, apprehensive, and guilty, they were most comfortable with their backs to one another, a chill width of empty bed between them. Often they would lie awake for hours, the pressure of things unsaid attuning their nerves, until the simplest motion of one--no more than a foot rustling against the sheet--was enough to arouse the other as tensely and irritably as if a piece of chalk had squeaked upon a blackboard.

Each was often at the point of suggesting twin beds, each hoped such a purchase would be merely a step toward separate bedrooms, but it was difficult to discuss for they were baited by memory. They were still young enough to remember how much they had been in love when they were very young. Then, with the certainty of young lovers, they had known that nothing could ever change. "Oh, darling," she had said once, those years ago, "we'll never be indifferent to each other, will we? We'll never be bored." They had felt the superiority of young lovers for the vast world of the middle-aged who were bored, who were indifferent. "Promise me," she had exclaimed, "that we'll always sleep together."

Much had altered, much had been lost, but never so much that either was capable of declaring it outright. There was still the memory of ardor and early

love on the studio couch in the one-room-and-kitchenette, there was still the recollection of the agreeable apartment with what it had signified of his developing career as a young executive, there was even the pained irony of the Hollywood bed. It was, altogether, a subject too painful to discuss.

On a given night, the husband and wife had gone to bed early, and at two in the morning, they were still awake. A quarrel had developed that evening, it had been left unfinished, and each of them was restless. Not speaking to one another, lying a yard apart in the darkness, their emotions seemed to converse, anger begetting sullenness; sullenness, hurt; hurt, contrition; without ever a word. There were moments when one was ready to touch the other's hand, yet could not make the caress. A half hour later it would be the other.

Through the darkness came the cries of a baby.

"He's awake," said the wife out of the silence.

"Well, the nurse will take care of him," the husband answered.

They had conceived the baby in this very bed, out of the pathetic hope that a baby would mend matters. In desperation, they had conceived another which the wife was carrying now. Neither the baby which was born nor the one which was to come seemed very real to the husband.

The wife was stirring. "I've got to give him a bottle," she said.

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She had quit her side of the bed, and was fumbling with a wrapper. "I told you at dinner this was nurse's night off."

The husband sat up in bed and made a sound of exasperation as the baby wailed a little louder.

"I don't see what you're annoyed about," said the wife. "I'm the one who has to get up. Lord knows what you would do if you ever had to get up."

"I just have to get up in the morning." When there was no answer, he added sarcastically, "That's all."

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~~Such rents were no longer mended.~~ That evening his wife had offered him her cheek to kiss, cold as the drugstore coffee. Neither had mentioned breakfast. Their fights were now without climax and virtually continuous. [~~One could not end quarrels, one could only choke them off.~~]

From three rooms away he could hear his wife singing to the baby. "Sssh, go to sleep, my love," came his wife's voice, gentle in its concern. His baby son continued to wail, but the loud cries were no longer so terrified. Fright and loneliness ended. Now, the baby could cry with indignation, seeming to say that he had waited long indeed for his wants to be filled. "That's right, baby, that's right," his wife crooned softly, until indignation ebbed into drowsy sobs, comfortable and sensuous.

The husband could picture the wife holding the child to her breast, her hair down, her face soft. The baby hiccupped with the loud unconcern of a fat man finishing a meal and his wife giggled. He felt far away from both. His wife was luckier than he. In her loneliness, in their frozen loneliness, she could turn to the infant and find solace and humor in the smallest gurgle of its belly.

He was not fair. It was all she had. He had the world of his business life with its concerns, its activity, the sense it could give him of being, after all, not unimportant. She had only the apartment, the servants to manage--a task she loathed--and the tepid routine of shopping, of lunch with friends, the entertaining his work demanded, so much less ~~interesting~~ absorbing than the results of that entertainment she could experience only at second-hand. She seemed ~~to~~ disinterested now in almost all they did. When he would ask her what she thought of business associates ~~she~~ they had been host to, she would shrug. "They're all right, I suppose."

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"Why should I? They're not interested in me. They're interested in you. ~~You're~~ You're the one who does things."

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"Aren't you asleep yet?" he asked abruptly out of the darkness.

"No, I'm not. Why don't you sleep?" she asked him.

He grunted some unintelligible sound to conceal how wide-awake he felt. He was really furious at her. If she would only fall asleep! Once he could allow himself to think about the girl he would be visiting again in a few days, he knew that he could compose himself, could drift into slumber with pleasant anticipation.

In the silence of the dark bedroom, he felt certain she knew what he was thinking about. "Do go to sleep," he muttered.

They both lay on their backs, each staring at the dark ceiling. Although they did not touch, he knew her body was rigid. With indifference, with resentment, with--no use concealing it from himself--distaste, he could just make out the small mound her pregnant body lifted against the sheets.

"Can I ask you a question?"

Her voice came quietly, evenly, from the space beside him.

"Go ahead," he answered, almost certain what it would be.

"Have you been having any affairs?"

"Yes," he answered, and turned toward her, as though to receive whatever she might offer him, her tears, her rage, her hurt, even disdain if it should come.

"Oh, I see," said the wife, "I didn't know."

"Yes," he said again. It was out. He had a kind of relief. Now, perhaps they could talk about it.

"How long has it been going on?" she asked in the same even voice.

"I don't know. Two years perhaps."

"You mean even before Baby was born."

"I suppose so."

He could sense her drawing further and further away from him. He had no idea at all of what she would say next.

"You must have thought I was pretty dumb," his wife said slowly.

"I didn't think anything at all."

"You just kept. . " She didn't finish the sentence. "That time you went to Chicago," she said after the pause.

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the dark, her hand might have indicated the mound beneath the coverlet. "Of course, this makes it impossible for me to act the same as you."

He made no answer.

After awhile, she said, "Do I know the women?"

"No," he said quietly.

"Then why don't you tell me their names?"

"Is that important?"

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"Are you going to tell me the names?" she persisted like a child.

"No, I won't."

"Well, why?"

There was everything she had denied him, or grudgingly bestowed, these past years. The anger he felt toward her as a woman could be restrained no longer. "Because if I tell you their names, I will have to stop seeing them. I'm not ready to do that yet. There've been some pleasant moments, you see."

This was the moment when, ideally, she should have struck him. It would have relieved him. Instead, she lay back again upon the pillow, her arms over her chest, and stared at the ceiling.

He tried to reach her. "I'm sorry," he said again.

She made no motion. He could only turn away from her and make some wretched attempt to fall asleep.

It was quite impossible. His heart was beating, his mind was in a ferment. They must have a talk, he told himself. Perhaps they could work out some sort

of arrangement. They were not stupid. She could understand as well as he how complicated things had become. Was it altogether impossible for her to understand that he needed certain kinds of freedom?

She would demand such freedom in return. Could he give it to her? The husband asked himself, and decided that he did not care. If she so desired, he would not stand in her way. He could offer her equality at least.

Again he found himself thinking of the Army. The barracks talk of the men had unmanned him. Their descriptions of women were so detailed. Out of his love and need for his wife, out of the privacy and intensity of their passion, he had been most vulnerable. He had a loathing at the thought of her giving herself to some man who cared nothing, who would laugh about her later with a dozen others for audience. Now he had admonished her in his letters, how he had accused, how he had refused to believe her, searching each line she wrote for evasion and double-meaning. It was only after he returned from the war that he was able to believe she had been faithful to him.

He could understand such jealousy now. He had been so young at the time, he had accomplished so little--no more than college and a year of work. There had been nothing exceptional about him, nothing but her love for him. She had thought him extraordinary.

His wife turned on the bed-lamp. Her eyes were puffed, the tip of her nose was red. "Maybe I have something to tell you," she whispered.

He drew within himself, on guard, aware with a kind of compassion that her need to hurt him was keen. It could be only a reflection of how he had hurt her, and he wished to protest. Why must she still be so capable of pain?"

Her mouth quivered as she spoke. "What would you say if I told you I've had. . certain experiences, too?"

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"While I was in the Army?"

"Oh, what did you know?" she burst out. "I was so miserable, and you were

such a pig. Your letters were terrible."

"I'm sorry about those letters," he managed to say.

"You don't know how they made me feel." [illegible]

Diffidently, he asked, "Who was the man?"

"I don't even remember his name. That's how different I am from you." Her mouth was quivering, and he watched it raptly. [illegible] It seemed more alive than he or she; like a laceration in his own flesh it enabled him to feel her anguish.

"He made me pregnant."

"What!"

Abstractedly, she nodded her head, as if answering the question for herself. "I didn't know what I wanted to do, and it was all a mess. [illegible] I was such a ninny. I botched everything."

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"I had to have an operation. How do you like that?"

"Oh, stop." He turned his face to the pillow, his arms covering his head, exactly as he had lain earlier when she had been striking him.

"I had an operation," she repeated, "and when I was carrying Baby, I was afraid I might not be right, and he would be born not a normal baby. That was what I worried about."

The husband began to weep. He cried openly, crying for her and the portion of her frozen silence she had uncovered to him. It was all so long ago, and she had suffered so needlessly. He fumbled toward her, and held her in an embrace. Quietly, she began to cry with him.

"Oh, you poor kid, you poor kid," he repeated over and over. He was not entirely unaware of his generosity, and a nuance must have appeared in his voice. After awhile, his wife stopped weeping, and sat up.

"I'm so sorry for you," he said.

His wife got out of bed, and slipped the wrapper over her gown. "Good night," she said, "I'm going to sleep in nurse's room."

"Come back," he said. "I mean it."

She smiled distantly, bent over, offered her cheek for him to kiss. "It's not too bad to be a man, is it?" she asked.

With the lamp on, the husband lay alone in the Hollywood bed, emotions spent. He was sad, but his sadness was ~~xxxxxx~~ not unpleasant. One moved from jealousy to pity, one got older, and after awhile would it matter so terribly that they had been young once, just ready to marry and passionate, single-minded and single-hearted about each other. Now, there was the larger world he had entered, and if she could not follow. . ~~It must be painful for her, he thought.~~ What must it feel like to be a wife, he wondered.

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NORMAN MAILER

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"I'm so sorry for you," he said.

His wife got out of bed, and slipped the wrapper over her gown. "Good night," she said, "I'm going to sleep in nurse's room."

"Come back," he said. "I mean it."

She smiled distantly, bent over, offered her cheek for him to kiss. "It's not too bad to be a man, is it?" she asked.

With the lamp on, the husband lay alone in the Hollywood bed, emotions spent. He was sad, but his sadness was not unpleasant. One moved from jealousy to pity, one got older, and after awhile would it matter so terribly that they had been young once, just ready to marry and passionate, single-minded and single-hearted about each other. Now, there was the larger world he had entered, and if she could not follow . . . What must it feel like to be a wife, he wondered.