NORMAN MAILER AND THE DYNAMITE CLUB

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In the late fall of 1989, I received a phone call one afternoon at my home in Boston from Judith McNally, Norman Mailer's personal secretary. I'd never met Mailer but had devoured just about everything he'd ever written; since reading *The Naked and the Dead* in college twenty years earlier, he'd been among my very favorite writers. So I was both surprised and excited when the secretary asked if I would be interested in attending an upcoming evening with Mailer in Washington, D.C.—a private gathering of something called the Dynamite Club. Apparently, one of the members had mentioned my name as someone worth including.

I later learned that the Dynamite Club had evolved out of Mailer's research for his epic novel about the CIA, *Harlot's Ghost*. He'd become acquainted with Jim Hougan, whose book on Watergate, *Secret Agenda*, had captivated him. Hougan had introduced Mailer to a bookstore in D.C., tucked away in a high-rise on K Street, that specialized in intelligence matters. Essentially, Hougan related to me, "You had to be in the game to know where it was, and Norman would always spend a fortune there."

At the time I had yet to publish or even begin writing *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, what later became an 824-page tome about the assassination of President Kennedy. But I'd been researching the subject for years. In the late 1970s, I'd interviewed many key witnesses while doing numerous articles for *The Village Voice* and other publications, when both houses of Congress were investigating anew the events surrounding November 22, 1963 in Dallas.

The next meeting of the Dynamite Club was to take place at the home of Bernard Fensterwald Jr., in the Washington suburb of Alexandria. He was an attorney who'd represented James McCord (the burglar who blew the whis-

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tle on Watergate), James Earl Ray (convicted assassin of Martin Luther King, Jr.), and Richard Case Nagell (a purported double agent who claimed inside knowledge about the Kennedy assassination). I knew Fensterwald and had interviewed Nagell a number of times.

I arrived around six p.m. at Fensterwald's red-brick townhouse, built in 1852 and used by the Union Army as a hospital during the Civil War. The three floors were filled with antiques and rare paintings. "Bud," as his friends called the attorney, had invited me to spend the night—as it turned out, in a four-poster bed where Abraham Lincoln once slept!

No recording or note-taking was permitted at the Dynamite Club gatherings, but nobody told me I couldn't jot down notes afterward. Attendees on that crisp early November night in 1989 (besides Mailer, Hougan, Fensterwald, and myself), included Colonel L. Fletcher Prouty, Chief of Special Operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff under President Kennedy; Jeff Goldberg, at the time doing research for a biography of ex-CIA counterintelligence chief James Angleton; and two more attorneys—Jim Lesar, co-founder with Fensterwald of the Assassination Archives Research Center, and Dan Alcorn, an expert in the Freedom of Information Act.

Mailer, sixty-four at the time, arrived shortly after I did. He was wearing a green tweed jacket and a sweater, no tie. My notes recorded him as "subdued, rather gnome-like," but I recall our having an animated conversation following Fensterwald's introducing us. He'd been working on his CIA book for five years, he told me. It had already been trimmed back from 1,500-some pages to about 1,200—but Mailer still expected the novel's size to double. It was the story of the CIA over a thirty-year period, as seen through the eyes of one man who rises through the ranks. Mailer seemed very knowledgeable on all the players and, since I'd interviewed some of them (including Angleton, on three occasions, one of the prototypes for *Harlot's Ghost*), he had some questions to pose.

What were the Cuban exiles like? Mailer asked me. The ones who'd worked for the Agency, like Manuel Artime and Antonio Veciana: were they Type 1 or Type 2 Latins? Based on what Mailer knew about Mexicans, Type 1 would die for you, but you must be willing to do the same; Type 2, you couldn't trust at all. Artime was a Type 2, I replied, but Veciana was a Type 1. Mailer nodded and grinned.

We had more in common than a fascination with cloak-and-dagger types. We both loved boxing and had spent considerable time with Muhammad

Ali in his heyday, and we talked about the second Ali fight with Joe Frazier that we'd each attended. Mailer had seen Ali about a year ago, and he seemed in pretty good shape. He himself had had to quit boxing—"not enough wind."

By the time we all sat down to a special stew that Fensterwald said he'd been cooking for a week with wine and cognac, I felt comfortable enough to call him Norman. The meal around a walnut dining table covered a plethora of dark topics. Hougan and Goldberg got into an argument about whether it had been Chicago mobster Sam Giancana or Mayor Richard Daley who "bought" Illinois for JFK in the 1960 presidential election. Colonel Prouty, who'd been part of the CIA as well as the military, stated unequivocally that Kennedy's assassination had been a coup d'etat. According to what Hougan learned from Carl Shoffler, one of three policemen who arrested the Watergate burglars in June 1972, there had been two earlier break-ins at the Federal Reserve—but the records disappeared from police files.

I told Norman my theory about Nixon, that his attempt to get the CIA's files on "the whole Bay of Pigs thing" was to ascertain what the Agency really knew about the Kennedy assassination. Norman responded that Nixon, when Vice President, could have been *the* planner of the early government attempts to knock off Cuba's Fidel Castro, because Eisenhower "would have stayed above that."

Wasn't Castro surely tipped off about all the plots against him? Why was Kennedy's assassination completely bypassed in the Pentagon Papers? Could Henry Kissinger have been a Soviet spy? Norman, who often sat at the table with his head down—"hard to tell whether he is really with it or not," I wrote afterward—perked up the wilder the theories got. "I'm a novelist," he explained with a smile.

It was heady stuff. Norman had only one bourbon all night, saying: "I know my limitations." When we finished the fruit compote and said good night, Norman said he'd be pleased to peruse some of the pieces I'd written for *The Village Voice* and others.

So I sent a package of my articles to his Brooklyn address, which Norman wrote back that he'd read "with great interest, learned a fair amount of new stuff." He wanted to talk more concerning his doubts about Richard Case Nagell, a double agent around whom I was looking to write a book. "I'm encouraged generally by the meetings of the Dynamite Club and hope we thrive," he concluded.

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The next get-together I attended took place on February 10, 1990, at the Army-Navy Club in Washington where James Angleton used to imbibe martinis and dine on a regular basis—sometimes with journalists like myself, after "retiring" from the CIA in 1974. It was also where Norman happened to be overnighting on this trip. He told me over drinks that many would think the main character in *Harlot's Ghost* was based on Angleton, which in a way was true, "but I've gone beyond that." Angleton was too complex, and Norman said he couldn't really know him well enough.

We also talked about Fidel Castro. Norman had traveled to Havana in December, and spent more than an hour with the Cuban Premier. "It was like being with a king," he said. It wasn't only Fidel's regal bearing. Castro combined being very personal—talking to you as if no one else existed, loving to argue over particular points—but also that he considered himself the leader of the Third World. His big question was whether the new Eastern Bloc democracies and the (soon-to-dissolve) Soviet Union would side with the West in exploiting the Third World.

Mailer saw Castro as unwilling to reach accommodation with the United States, in the sense that he was regarded as the man who stood up to the giant and succeeded. This was Castro's place in history, and he didn't want to change things to the extent that his country then became "just another Puerto Rico." If the U.S. were smart, Norman added, we'd buy some of Cuba's sugar and see where that led—but of course we never would.

I told Norman that I knew some "insider" information concerning how the CIA had tried to pin the blame on Cuba for the Kennedy assassination and how much I'd like to get to the island and speak with Castro about this. He responded that the Columbian writer Gabriel García Márquez spent half the year in Cuba, where he was regarded as a great hero, and would be the best entrée to Castro. Norman thought he could get a letter to Márquez on my behalf.

This latest round of the Dynamite Club included Tom Mangold, a British writer hard at work on the Angleton biography *Cold Warrior*, along with his research associate Jeff Goldberg. Besides Mailer, Jim Hougan, and myself, some new faces were on-hand: Mike Fellner, who called himself "the only left-wing private investigator" in Washington, and Colonel William Cowan, a Hougan source and intelligence expert on Lebanon. Steve McClintock, an

ex-State Department guy who'd been a liaison to the Drug Enforcement Agency, was our host for the evening.

We all went in to dinner in a private room; I ordered the pheasant in truffle sauce. Before the courses began arriving, Fellner told a story about showing up at a Ted Kennedy speech in Madison, Wisconsin in 1975, greeting the Senator with some "theater" about his having driven off the bridge at Chappaquidick. Fellner wore a scuba-diving suit and a girlfriend came dressed as Mary Jo Kopechne, while they sang "Bridge Over Troubled Waters." Kennedy was livid and walked off the stage. "What were you trying to accomplish?" Norman asked. Fellner replied, "It was theater." Norman said, barely under his breath, "This is why the Left never gets anywhere." End of conversation.

I talked with Mangold about the curious fact that three of us present—Hougan, Goldberg, and myself—had all interviewed Angleton here at the Army-Navy Club. We concurred that the CIA man always made you feel like you were *the one*. Yet the way he spoke was so strange, seeming never to quite finish his sentences. Later, when I wondered why Angleton had so wined-and-dined me—a relative non-entity as a young journalist—Mangold replied that it was probably a combination of his drinking problem (being unhappy with his wife at home) and his need to impart his views on the Communist menace to anyone who would listen. Norman, I noticed, pricked up his ears for the Angleton conversation.

Mangold and Mailer talked about the publishing world, their houses being Simon & Schuster and Random House respectively. When I mentioned how much it all seemed to have changed, Norman went on to observe that Simon & Schuster would back you big-time if your book was selling, otherwise they didn't remember your name.

Norman initiated our formal session to discuss what he termed "the mysteries." We launched first into Watergate. Hougan spoke of a new book being written, with a huge advance, proposing that whistleblower John Dean had actually authorized the Watergate break-in. The reason? Dean wanted to find out what information the Democrats had on his wife Maureen, who'd once been involved in a prostitution ring in Florida and was friends with several women (including a Congressman's wife) whose names had surfaced in a similar Washington operation. This got Goldberg all in a dither, dismissing the notion as folly and arguing vociferously, not letting Hougan or anyone else get a further word in. Norman turned to Colonel Cowan and said in a semi-whisper, "That's the Dynamite Club." As the evening wore on, Goldberg

continued to insist the authors of that book would be laughed out of town. Norman, "as a novelist," closed the topic by saying he liked the Dean idea as a motif and would probably put it in his book.

I had earlier interjected that there had been many possible motives for Watergate. Norman readily agreed, particularly when I raised Nixon's apparent interest in what was inside the wall safe of Hank Greenspun. Maybe it wasn't what the publisher of the *Las Vegas Sun* knew about Howard Hughes' under-the-table "loan" to the President. Maybe it was the Hughes connection, through his top aide Robert Maheu, to the CIA plots to kill Castro. This got Norman going, wondering again whether Nixon's possible role as initiator of those plans when Vice President was what he most feared being exposed later.

Then Mangold began arguing against conspiracy theories in general. Others at the table discussed how it took fifteen years before the CIA's use of the Mob in its anti-Castro plots ever surfaced. "Two's a plot," said Norman, "and three's a conspiracy." Mangold countered that, compared to the secrecy in his native England, the U.S. had the world's most open democracy. "Try using FOIA [the Freedom of Information Act] and see how open," Norman scoffed. He went on to tell Mangold that all the CIA types he'd interviewed were masters at deception. It wasn't that everyone was in on the same conspiracy, but rather more of a mind-set, a way of approaching life.

Mangold revealed that Angleton once had a long meeting with then-Defense Secretary James Schlesinger about his suspicion that Henry Kissinger was a Soviet "mole." (Allegedly, Schlesinger finally said in exasperation, "You give me the evidence and I'll act.") Our host from the "Foreign Service," Steve McClintock, had been largely listening through the night—but upon hearing this Angleton story, he interjected: "What a fool." McClintock went on that journalist types don't know the real inside picture: why should a spy talk to a journalist, what's in it for them? The question hung in the air.

We wrapped it up about 11:30, shortly after our waiter came in with a message. "Mr. Mailer, your wife called," the gentleman said. "Everything's all right—but she said to tell you that Mr. Tyson lost." The undefeated heavyweight champion, Mike Tyson, had just been knocked out by Buster Douglas, a 42-to-1 underdog. Norman would later laugh heartily, remembering the moment that he heard about it: "Now that's probably the only place he's ever been called *Mr.* Tyson!" At the time, Norman recalled watching George Foreman's recent KO of Gerry Cooney, the way he'd done it convincing

Mailer that Foreman could take Tyson, too. The way he'd set up Cooney for the kill was the best knockout Norman had ever seen. The difference between amateur and pro fighters, he went on, was the difficulty in following up without missing wildly once you had the other guy in trouble.

Dirty jokes ended the night, with Norman telling one in the hall about a Hungarian "entertainer" who broke walnuts—and, many years later, coconuts—with his massive hard-on. Then Norman and I sat down to hang out alone for a little while. I asked what he considered the value of these meetings. "I thought tonight's was quite good," he said. "It's really to develop new leads, where one of us might pick up on something and take it somewhere."

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I went home to compose a prospective letter to Gabriel García Márquez concerning my interest in interviewing Castro, and sent it to Norman for review. "I believe that my book will finally put to rest the speculation that Premier Castro had anything to do with the tragedy of President Kennedy's death," I wrote Márquez. "Indeed, I know that Lee Harvey Oswald was deceived by two former CIA agents, both Cuban exiles . . . who falsely convinced him that he was working on Castro's behalf." I added more details and, later in the letter, said: "I firmly believe that it is time that the truth be told, that the historical record be set straight."

I wrote Norman that "perhaps I reveal too much in this letter, but I felt I should put my cards on the table." When I saw him at the next Dynamite Club meeting in mid-April 1990, he told me he'd learned that you couldn't trust the security of faxes and so he hadn't sent my letter on to Márquez in Cuba. Besides, Norman felt that Márquez was a rather suspicious person who would be suspect of someone laying so much out in a letter. But he also had something he was looking to get to Márquez and would pursue this on my behalf, but thought I should also try through the Cuban Consulate in Washington. Personally, he doubted Castro would want to discuss the subject—and, it turned out after I tried the Consulate later, he was right.

Our conversation took place at the penthouse apartment of Edward Jay Epstein on New York's Upper East Side. Epstein was the author of an early dissection of the Warren Commission's flaws (*Inquest*). His later works, *Legend* and *Deception*, had drawn heavily on interviews with Angleton. Also

present, along with Jim Hougan, was Kevin Coogan, an expert on post-World War Two fascism, and the prominent novelist Don DeLillo, whose 1988 novel *Libra* zeroed in on Oswald and the assassination. (DeLillo seemed a shy man who stayed largely silent throughout the night).

We would cover considerable territory over several rounds of drinks and a sushi dinner. Early in the discussion, Epstein raised a question about the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 that had brought the U.S. and the USSR to the brink of nuclear war. Had there really been Soviet missiles on the island? Epstein wondered about why there had apparently been no attempt to conceal them, as well as the tip-off having come from a double agent named Oleg Penkovsky. Could it have all been a ploy to force America to ultimately agree to remove our missiles from Turkey and leave Cuba alone? None of us had an answer.

At one point, I asked Epstein about Angleton's theories on Oswald and the assassination. He said that Angleton had talked of Oswald becoming friends with some Cubans when he lived for two-and-a-half years in the Soviet Union, and of the possibility that the Russians were later using Oswald on a mission to try to get into Cuba and re-establish his contacts for purposes of information-gathering. But Angleton always posed things cryptically, or hypothetically (a reason, perhaps, that he both fascinated and repelled Mailer, I surmised). According to Epstein, Angleton believed that the way the CIA was structured made it an easy target for penetration by the KGB—and so it became the man's "Moby Dick" to try to ferret out how and what these double agents were doing.

Norman was tired after a recent spate of college lectures. He was very intrigued by a letter that former Kennedy aide Arthur Schlesinger Jr. had published in the *New York Times*, making reference to the possibility that the Mob was behind the assassination. The fact that someone like Schlesinger was now talking publicly like this! Norman also spoke of some Kennedy intimates seriously wondering whether Vice President Lyndon Johnson was really the mastermind (there was certainly no love lost between LBJ and the Kennedys). For purposes of his novel, Norman asked once again what the CIA's covert action specialist David Phillips and Cuban exile leader Manuel Artime were like.

He also told what might be described as a parable. One night after a huge fight with one of his wives, Norman recalled, he was drunk and walking along a road when a car struck him slightly. As he seemed to be okay, he sim-

ply took the driver's name and the fellow drove on. The next morning, Norman awoke with a cut on his head and a badly bruised hip. His first instinct was to go after the guy who hit him. Then he realized that, if he did, he would have to *do* something about it. Norman compared this to the likely situation that the Kennedy family was in after JFK was killed. They didn't really want to know, because then they'd have to do something.

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Later that spring of 1990, another meeting of the Dynamite Club was held at Bud Fensterwald's home in Alexandria. There were the familiar faces—Mailer, Hougan, Goldberg, Dan Alcorn—and two newcomers: James Grady, author of the 1974 spy thriller *Six Days of the Condor* (which became the film *Three Days of the Condor* starring Robert Redford), and Robert Gettlin, co-author of the soon-to-be-published Watergate book *Silent Coup*, which fingered John Dean as the set-up man. And there was perhaps to be a special guest, we were told by Hougan.

Edward Jay Epstein couldn't come this time, because he was on a deadline. "I'm on a deadline, too," said Norman. In fact, he was now into his sixth year of writing *Harlot's Ghost*, three years *beyond* the deadline. But the novel would be coming out next February, he said, a first volume anyway of around 2,000 pages. He didn't want to delay any longer or he might get his editors in trouble at a rapidly-changing Random House. Their attitude had shifted, Norman explained, after the publisher gave Truman Capote a fortune in advance money to do his last book—but when he died, found no manuscript beyond thirty random pages.

Over drinks, a big argument ensued once more between Goldberg and all the others. This was after he made the claim based on his research that, ever since its failures in the 1950s, the CIA had never tried to put an "illegal" agent under an alias inside the USSR. Norman countered, how can you trust these guys, everything they've ever done is based on lying to you. Not so, Goldberg countered, after interviewing 200-some CIA people for Mangold's Angleton book, his own mind had been changed—some of them shoot straight and want the correct history set down.

This led to a Mailer story. In the 1950s, when writing his novel *The Deer Park* in a Brooklyn rooming house, he'd lived one floor above Russian master spy Rudolf Abel, who was running an espionage network in the U.S. seek-

ing military secrets. Norman used to ride the elevator with the gregarious Abel quite regularly. "Must have looked good later on my dossier," Mailer quipped. (Abel, arrested and found guilty in 1957, was exchanged for Soviet-captured U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers in 1962.)

We batted around ideas about the Kennedy assassination for awhile, including Fensterwald's telling of two Canadian researchers who believed either that Oswald was trying to hit Jackie Kennedy—or, that Jackie had Jack killed because of his philandering! Another researcher, trying to finish a BBC documentary that pointed to members of the Corsican Mafia firing from the grassy knoll, had had a nervous breakdown.

We were all fairly well-oiled by 8:15 pm, but still waiting on dinner. That's because one of the Dynamiters assured us that none other than G. Gordon Liddy was intending to show up. He'd been the undercover operative for the Nixon White House "Plumbers' Unit," and chief organizer of the Watergate break-ins. After he refused to testify to Senate investigators, Liddy wound up being convicted of burglary and conspiracy and sentenced to twenty years in federal prison. He served almost fifty-two months—and, for fifteen years since his release, he'd pretty much maintained his silence.

It was Hougan who'd reached out to Liddy, and Goldberg had his unlisted number. Norman dialed the phone, and said when Liddy picked up: "This is Norman Mailer, and I came all the way to Washington to meet you." Liddy explained that he'd lost the address. Norman passed it along, and Liddy said okay, he'd soon be there. So we went ahead and sat down to dinner around 8:30, the discussion turning back to whether John Dean had orchestrated the break-in to see what the Democrats had on his then-girlfriend Maureen and her former life as a call girl.

We were approaching dessert when Liddy rang the bell. He had a thin face, was balding and mustached, and was approaching his sixtieth birthday. From here on out, the evening largely belonged to G. Gordon Liddy, who proved to be a wickedly funny fellow.

What he did for Nixon, Liddy told the Dynamite Club, he'd had a lot of fun doing, "and if Bush called tomorrow, I'd do it again" (referring to then-President George H.W. Bush). Some of the Watergate principals were another matter. Liddy said he'd been warned about John Dean from the beginning, and hated him. In his view, Dean was simply ambitious, using his White House counsel's job for personal gain. Chuck Colson, Nixon's hatchet man in the White House, was the type of person who always needed

a cause, dating back to his early days in the Marines. Liddy just wished Colson would stop bugging him about Jesus. "When he became born again, I thought, if he'd walk over his grandmother for Nixon, what will he do for Jesus?" As for Jeb Magruder, Liddy said he was the kind of guy who'd push his own mother and kids out of the Titanic to save his own skin.

Bart Porter "got rich off Watergate real quick," and Liddy added that "Watergate has been very good to me, too." He said he didn't like to be considered a "survivor." His first novel, *Will*, had sold more than a million copies and been made into a TV movie. He was writing a new novel, slated for publication the next fall.

Since Liddy had gone right to work for the FBI in Washington after finishing law school in the 1950s—receiving multiple commendations from Director J. Edgar Hoover before leaving the Bureau in 1962—the talk gravitated to Hoover's secret files. When Hoover died in May 1972, Liddy was by then working for Nixon and recalled how the White House had tried to get hold of the files. So had Hoover's successor, L. Patrick Gray. But it was too late. The director's secretary, Helen Gandy, "was like a nun to the archbishop" and had immediately put them into a big shredder.

It wasn't so much Hoover going after scandalous information on important people, Liddy said, but simply that he (and Gandy) had been around since 1919. So over the years, any slick dick in town fell into discovery mode. The FBI might be looking for a robber in a hotel and stumble upon Senator X with an under-aged girl. This didn't go into a regular case file to be read by all 200 clerks. No, Mrs. Gandy made a file card, and a larger report was kept by Hoover privately, to be referred to if necessary in the future. Then Senator X would be visited by an FBI man who assured him that Hoover didn't put this information in the Bureau files, but it would be best to be more discreet in the future. And this was the source of Hoover's power. Senator X would then go into an appropriations hearing and say, "The FBI wants $100,000 for a new fleet of cars? How about $200,000?"

Hoover hated the Kennedys, Liddy continued. Hoover had the story of Inga Arvad on Jack—she'd been a suspected Nazi spy and one of his early mistresses—so President Kennedy couldn't fire him. Hoover knew that Bobby Kennedy was a fitness freak. So when Bobby would come down to work out in the FBI gym, he kept getting asked for his FBI credentials. "I'm the Attorney General, the brother of the President, there's no card in my

shorts!" Liddy imitated Bobby saying. Finally, an exasperated Bobby had to build his own gym on top of the Justice Department building.

A couple of times as Liddy regaled us with stories, Norman asked for physical descriptions of individuals. One was Mrs. Gandy. Another was Manuel Artime. Liddy praised Artime, having once visited the Cuban exile at his home in Florida and found him charming. Besides, Artime gave him a CIA "assassin gun" and a vintage World War Two weapon. Captured by Castro's soldiers during the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion, Artime had also been tied to the Cuban exiles involved in the Watergate break-in. CIA veteran E. Howard Hunt (godfather to one of Artime's children) was in charge of the Cuban team.

A few of us pressed forward here, looking for an insider's view. But Liddy refused to speculate on the real reasons behind Watergate, maintaining he didn't know about all the hidden agendas, although the White House definitely wanted to discover what Larry O'Brien (chief of the Democratic National Committee) had in his files. By the way, Liddy added, it was the FBI—not the Watergate team—that broke into the Chilean Embassy.

Hougan got some words in edgewise about interviewing Admiral Bobby Inman—who Hougan thought was Watergate's "Deep Throat." Inman spoke in a whisper the entire interview, thinking he was being bugged. The speculation about Deep Throat led us to the military background of *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward, who was tight with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Woodward's latest book was a semi-biography of the CIA's honcho under Reagan, William Casey. Liddy, who clearly didn't like Woodward, loved that ABC's Ted Koppel had nailed the journalist on the diagram of a room where he claimed to have met with Casey. Well, Mailer responded, it's possible in one's excitement not to remember what a room looked like. It didn't necessarily mean that Woodward made it up.

If Liddy's ongoing zippered lip concerning Watergate was a disappointment, other insights were not. He'd gone with E. Howard Hunt to a meeting with the CIA's expert on assassination methodology about nailing columnist Jack Anderson, who'd been breaking too many stories about secret CIA dealings. Hunt was very into using LSD, according to Liddy. He'd already considered putting it into the restaurant soup of Daniel Ellsberg, before the Pentagon Papers whistleblower was to give a speech. Now he thought that smearing LSD on the steering wheel of Jack Anderson's car might make

the journalist go crazy and crash. But the CIA's assassination expert told them this wouldn't work.

Liddy was no stranger to LSD. As a prosecutor in Dutchess County, New York, in 1966 he'd organized the arrest and unsuccessful trial of Timothy Leary. "I never found him high," Liddy confessed, "even when I busted him twice." Years later, with Liddy and Leary both having done their time, in the 1980s they'd gone on the college debate circuit together and become friends, even visiting one another's homes. Liddy had found Leary "very witty, a brilliant psychologist" who "only smoked tobacco" as they traveled. At one dinner, Liddy recalled Leary warning him to stay away from some particular brownies—"knowing your personality"—and steering him instead to the caramel cookies. "He's the kinda guy," Liddy concluded, "who'd piss in your pocket and tell you it's raining." In other words, I thought, a man after Liddy's own heart.

By now, the brandy had reached the table and was going strong. Liddy went on a long, very funny riff about prison guards, "the only guys who voluntarily spend thirty years in the joint." Convicts, he revealed, hate to be called inmates. He spoke of making some Mob friends during his own incarceration. After he got out, he went to visit some of "the family" in New York City. When Liddy walked in to see a pile of money on a table that he'd just as soon not have known about, he ducked into the bathroom for a half-hour, waiting for them to do something with all the cash. Finally they knocked, and he emerged. "Are you done yet?" Liddy asked them.

Liddy spoke of another occasion when somebody ran him down on his lawn in a hit-and-run, and he was pretty badly hurt. He was told later by his Mob buddies that "it had been taken care of."

How do you end a night like this? Fifteen years later, Jim Hougan wrote me his reminiscence about the finale: "The last scene is indelible in my memory. It was quite late, and everyone had had a bit too much to drink—in fact, a lot too much—and Norman and Gordon were standing in the middle of the dining room, butting their foreheads together like stags, and laughing crazily. It was painful, silly and iconic, all at once. (Not unlike the times, in that respect)."

I remember that Norman instigated the head butting with Liddy. When it was over, the novelist and the G-man embraced and then exchanged addresses.

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There may have been one more Dynamite Club meeting after that, but I was unable to attend. The next time I saw Norman was the following March, 1991, for a lunch in his Brooklyn Heights neighborhood. He said it was basically him and Hougan keeping the Club together and, when they couldn't put in the time, the get-togethers didn't happen. He wondered if Fensterwald still wanted to keep it going. (Fensterwald died unexpectedly, of a heart attack, two weeks later.)

Norman and I reminisced about the night with Gordon Liddy. We'd both rather liked the man, although to Liddy we were still "the foe," as Norman put it. He said he'd like to sit down alone with Liddy sometime and pick his brain on Watergate, since he didn't really learn anything new that night. Norman felt Liddy saying that he was just carrying out his orders while not caring about the outcome was bullshit.

As we walked toward a Chinese restaurant he liked, I asked Norman how *Harlot's Ghost* was coming along. He was still working on the editing. Some would have problems with the book, he thought, because it left so many questions up in the air—since it was really only half the story. But it was already 2,000 pages long, and he'd decided to go with that rather than spend another three to five years on it and publish a 4,000-page book, in which case you run into problems even binding the paper. Wouldn't that be a record of some kind? I asked. "Well, there was Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*," Norman replied. He asked if I'd ever read Thomas Mann's novel *Buddenbrooks*, which I hadn't. The main character in *Harlot's Ghost*, he added, was modeled on one of Mann's—a young man in search of himself, except this young man happens to be with CIA. "It's giving the CIA a human face," which had never been done before. The book covered the decade between 1955 and 1965, with flashbacks to earlier times. He really enjoys editing, Norman said, and could keep doing it forever; eventually, though, Random House would call it in, because they had a firm September publishing date.

We talked some more about Cuba, and my hope to go there. Norman said he'd been planning to visit the island with a photographer, and travel with Castro to the site of the Bay of Pigs for a thirtieth anniversary story in April. But the Cubans put him off, and he wasn't about to spend ten days in Havana waiting for the possibility of seeing Fidel again, he was too busy. Castro could be "cutesy," he noted, and went on to tell me a story of what ensued

after he'd brought up the name of Rolando Cubela at their earlier meeting. "Yes, that's a sad story," he remembered Castro responding. But when Norman mentioned Cubela's meeting with the CIA to obtain a weapon to shoot Fidel—the same day as JFK was assassinated—Castro raised his eyebrows and said, "Oh, really?" Norman looked at me, shook his head, and exclaimed: "Like hell he wasn't aware of that!"

But Gabriel Márquez could be key for my getting in, Norman felt. It was interesting, he thought, Márquez was really the opposite of his books: very tough, probing, cold, someone who could be the head of an intelligence service. He was the number two man in Cuba at this point, more so than Fidel's brother Raul, "maybe because Castro finds Márquez the smartest man he knows." And if and when Norman saw Márquez, he'd present my proposal to him if I provided some additional concrete material. They'd not yet had opportunity to meet. In 1987, Norman had heard he was in New York and somebody else had invited Márquez to dinner, "and I was jealous as hell."

I don't know if Norman ever sat down with Márquez, but I didn't. Nor did I get to Cuba, though I did publish two books on the Kennedy assassination. Norman's *Harlot's Ghost*, appearing that September of 1991, ultimately weighing in at 1,328 pages, with "TO BE CONTINUED" on the final page. Harlot is the "code name" of Hugh Tremont Montague, "an urbane, icily fascinating, lethal top-level CIA official," as *New York Times* reviewer John Simons put it, though he didn't specifically name James Angleton as a prototype. (Nor did reviewers equate Harry Hubbard, the protégé of Montague, with any character in Mann's *Buddenbrooks*.) Other "characters" whom we'd discussed at the Dynamite Club meetings made *Harlot's Ghost*, including Kennedy, Castro, Hoover, and E. Howard Hunt.

Hunt came across as a formidable figure whose "long pointed nose had an indentation just above the tip that suggested a good deal of purpose in his trigger finger." Hunt, a novelist himself under various pseudonyms, was then asked to review *Harlot's Ghost* for *GQ Magazine*, in which he wrote dismissively: "The writer who presumes to reveal the inner world of espionage without having experienced it is comparable to a young man haunting a brothel exit and asking patrons what it was like."

Mailer paid his first visit to CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, in late January 1992—where he received "a standing ovation from a standing-room-only crowd of more than 500 officials who crammed into the bubble-topped auditorium to hear him," according to a piece in the *New York Times*. Norman

stuck around for a two-hour debate afterward in the private conference room of CIA Director Robert Gates. The *Times* wondered: "Had they all forgotten that this was the same Norman Mailer who between belts of bourbon at his 50th birthday party in 1973 announced the creation of a 'people's C.I.A.' to rein in a devious agency that he said threatened American democracy? Forgotten, no, but perhaps forgiven," reporter Elaine Sciolino concluded.

Norman and I continued to stay in touch after the Dynamite Club closed up shop. The last time I saw him was in late 1995, not long after my attending a conference in Nassau that brought Cuban intelligence officials together with American researchers into the Kennedy assassination. Their conclusion? A conspiracy involving the CIA, the Mob, and anti-Castro Cuban exiles. Earlier in the year, Norman had published *Oswald's Tale* and told a C-Span interviewer he'd concluded that Oswald "probably did it. I felt there was a 75 percent certainty that it was a lone gunman." But, as Norman told me, he remained open-minded and would very much like to attend another such event if there was one.

He said he still wanted to write *Harlot's Ghost II*, and maybe would revive the Dynamite Club for that, but didn't see any pressing revelations which would make it that urgent. We ended, as we began the first night we met at Fensterwald's home, talking about boxing and Muhammad Ali. This time, I had my tape recorder running, as I was interviewing Norman for a book on African-American geniuses. "I'll tell you a story," Norman said. "About five years ago, *Esquire* gave a party honoring twenty or thirty people who'd had good pieces in their magazine. Ali was one and I was another. This was before his speech began to slur. So Norris [Norman's wife] and I walk in—she was looking lovely that night—and he starts talking to us. And he says [here, Mailer did an Ali imitation] 'Norman, how old are you? You're 62? Oh, you are in good shape, you're lookin' so good, I hope I'm in as good shape as you are when I am 62.' Well, I'm so pleased and excited and enjoying this so much that I've gotta urinate. I mean, I'm like an old dog. [Here, he cracked himself up laughing.] So I take off. And the moment I'm gone, Ali turns to Norris and says, 'You still goin' with that old man?!'"

This, Norman marveled, was just what Muhammad Ali would do to his opponents in the ring. He was a master trickster, designed at keeping you off-balance with his ever-fluid movements and his words. Perhaps, I muse now as I look back, not unlike those deft deceivers in the spy game—or the best of novelists, like Norman Mailer.