MASTER WEAVER IN ACTION

SUSAN MAILER

On October 26, 2013 Susan Mailer gave the keynote address at the Eleventh Annual meeting of the International Norman Mailer Society in which she recaptures key memories of time spent with her father in Mexico.

BAGS OF ICE, BOTTLES OF RUM AND TEQUILA, AND COLD BEER. It was Friday evening in Mexico City and time for the fun to begin. Mom and Salvador went out or entertained every weekend. Sometimes the parties were in their home, others at bars, dancing salons or at friend's homes. This time it would be at their place. It was a large crowd with expats and Mexicans, musicians, lawyers, doctors, writers, taxi drivers and one or two unemployed friends. Dad and Adele were in town for a few months and would be arriving at the party soon. I could hear the noise and music from my bedroom, bottles opening, ice clinking in glasses, people laughing. All of this fascinated me and I was thrilled every time I was invited into the living room and could be a part of the group. In one of these parties, I was told later by Mother that Dad got into a fight with someone who gave him a bloody nose and, Salvador seeing that his buddy was getting punched, jumped in to help him losing his two front teeth in the battle. I was proud that Dad and Chavo were so friendly. I also felt that I had two moms and two dads, which didn't make my mother very happy but it apparently amused Dad.

Very soon after my parents separated, my mother went to Mexico with Chavo and me to begin a new life. She fell in love with the country, the food and the man, probably in that order. Dad was with his new love, later his wife, Adele, a Brooklyn born Latina, Cuban on her mother's side and Peruvian on her father's side. So my American Jewish mother married a Mexican and my American Jewish father married a Latina, introducing hot sex and

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foreign flavor to their lives. Dad and Adele went to Mexico on many occasions to see me, sometimes staying for as long as three months in the city. I suspect that Norman also wanted to keep in touch with my mother who, after all had been his emotional and intellectual partner for ten years. At the time they were still friendly. He also liked Salvador, now my mother's husband and previously Adele's lover, before Dad and Mother came into their lives. When I was in my twenties and heard about this, it didn't come as a surprise since I had secretly always thought that Adele and Chavo went well together. Perhaps it was because they both had the Latino look and at that age I still didn't know it wasn't politically correct to do racial profiling.

During Dad's visits to Mexico he developed a passion for the bullfight. He was fascinated by the delicate bodies of the toreros draped in costumes of brilliant colors with shiny sparkles, shoes that looked more like ballet slippers and strange XIX Century Spanish hats. These lean and feminine looking men would go into battle with a strong and spirited bull, a symbol of virility, bravado and strength. It was a duel in which one or the other must die, usually the bull. Dad was fascinated by the paradoxical nature of the scene: the feminine masculinity and the brutality of the duel. It was a ballet of death.

I loved going to the bullfights with Dad and Adele. The first time I went I was four or maybe five years old. It was early afternoon and the sun was beating down on our heads. We had to wade through waves of people entering the Plaza de Toros. Once we were safely seated, Dad bought me a coke and got himself and Adele a beer from the vendors who walked up and down the bleachers. Dad had told me we were going to a special show and I couldn't wait for it to begin.

The fanfare began with trumpets signaling the beginning of the Corrida. There was silence in the crowd, I looked at Dad trying to catch his smile, I grabbed his hand, and Dad sat me on his lap so that I had a full view. The bullfighters, the matadors in full regalia, the picadors on their horses, the cuadrilla the torero's support group, the banderilleros, all in order of importance entered the arena to the rhythm of the music walking around the full circumference of the plaza, and exited. Then silence. The crowd waits, papers rustle in the mild breeze. A trumpet signals the beginning of the corrida, and from the opposite side of our seats we see a black bull barging in, running, looking left and right, ready to attack whatever crosses his path. He is beautiful, strong, full of energy. He runs around the arena, lifts his

front legs as in a jump, rams into the side barriers, stops, looks. From the inside walls several men with capes come out for a second so that the bull can see them waving, he runs from one to the other. I'm puzzled and I look up at Dad, who explains that these guys are showing the audience the bull's strength. The torero appears with his cape in hand, he slowly walks to the bull, and they eye each other, weighing their respective strength. The torero takes small steps and his cape is half open. When he is close enough he opens the cape completely and shakes it a bit saying "aja toro." The bull follows the cape, and sweeps by passing underneath it to the other side. The crowd yells "OLE!" The torero positions himself, again inching his way to the bull in small side steps as he opens the cape and the bull again passes underneath it. OLE!! The crowd is getting more excited. I follow the torero and bull closely, also looking up at Dad. When he shouts OLE! he gives me the cue that this is exciting and fun.

I wasn't totally sure how I felt. I knew something would happen to the bull and I liked the bull. I didn't want the torero to make fun of him or taunt him. Dad said that the bull was having a good time too, so not to worry. I kept a vigilant eye, not quite sure about his "good time." I was in a balancing act between what I perceived with my five-year-old "I" and what Daddy's reassuring words expressed. At the moment there seemed to be a tie between the two contenders. And Dad said as much: "Susie, just think of this as a contest. One of them will win, of course the loser will be sad because he lost and the winner happy."

"I want the bool to ween," I stated with total assurance, having a soft spot for the underdog even at that early age.

A pause, exit the torero, the sound of the trumpet heralding the entrance of the picador, a man on a padded horse with blinders and a long stick with a sharp iron tip at the end.

The bull studies the situation. He doesn't move.

"What's happening Daddee? Who is dat man with thee stick" (At that age I spoke a version of Spanglish with a definite Mexican sing song flavor to my words) and why is thee booll not moving? Tiene miedo?" Dad knew by now he had a problem. He had to carry me through the corrida emotionally unscathed since it was clear that I had a strong bias in favor of the bull. He said, "Susie, these guys are the bad guys, and they're going to try to beat the bull, but they won't win . . ." "I tink the booll weel win, but those horses are

sooo big," I said, "why are they wearing those tings, and what is thee bad man going to do with thee stick?"

At that point the bull went straight for the horse in a full run. He rammed his horns into the padding, answering my question. But the picador, that bad guy, he stuck the pointed pole right into the bull's neck between his head and his shoulders. Blood started seeping out of the wound. By now the bull was furious, pushing the horse against the wood planks of the plaza's round walls. But the more he pushed against the horse, the more punishment he got from the picador's sharp pole.

"Daddee, I do not like dis man." I wasn't at all happy with what was happening, I was worried about the horse and the bull and hated the bad guy with the pole.

"The bad guy is trying to make the bull tired but he's also in danger because if the horse falls, the bull will be able to hit the bad man with his horns," Dad answered.

"But Daddee, if the horse falls the bool will hit the horse with his horns and hurt him, and the bad guy will run away and nothing will happen to him."

"You're right honey but that's what makes it interesting. You never know what's going to happen. I think the horse will be ok, and so will the bull, even if he does get a bit tired"

"Daddee what will they do to the bad guy? I want him to go away."

Just then the trumpet signaled for the picador to leave. He took out the tip of the pole from the bull's neck, waited for him to calm down a bit while men with capes tried to get his attention away from the picador. Finally, he was able to walk the horse out of the arena through a special door. The bull was not moving, he was panting, and I could tell he was tired and angry, maybe confused. I wasn't sure if I wanted to stay, I was anxiously waiting for the next move but also wanting the whole thing to be over right away.

I didn't know that this was only the first bull and there were five more to go.

I hear the trumpet once again and see a banderillero come in. Instead of a cape he carries two colorful sticks, one in each hand. The bull, still in the same place doesn't notice him until the man arches his back, stands on his toes lifting his arms with the banderillas high above his head. The bull runs toward him while the man waits for the right time to strike. He sinks the banderillas into the bull's neck, exactly where the picador had hurt him

before. As he runs out of the Arena, another man appears with two more sticks and goes through the same ritual, only this time one of them doesn't sink in and falls to the floor. Finally a third man runs up to the bull, banderillas, in the air and attempts to sink them in, but by now the bull is not about to let himself be hurt anymore and he lifts his head and horns as if to strike the torero, who errs his mark and leaves the plaza running to the loud booing of the crowd. I'm upset now, I can feel the bull is suffering and he's tired. I'd like to stop this game right now.

"Daddee, I think the booll wants to go home, why can't they stop this now?"

"He's tired but he doesn't want to go home yet, he wants to finish this first. Sometimes," he said, "when you're doing something, like playing a game and you're losing, you might want to leave, but it's important you stay till it's over because you might get a second chance. I think the bull feels that way, he's thinking what his next move is going to be."

"But why are those men putting dee sticks into his neck?"

"They want him to be tired, he's very strong and the torero who is coming next has to pass the cape very close to the bull. If he's not tired enough he could hurt the torero."

"I don't care if he's hurt a leetl, I feel sorry for thee bull, what about you Daddee?"

He thought about this for a few seconds.

"I guess I do feel sorry for the bull, just a little. But this will end soon and he'll go home."

"Are you sure?"

But I still wasn't satisfied, I was worried about the blood and the bull, was he in pain?

"Daddee, what about the blood, and those tings they stuck into his neck, is it hurting him?"

Dad answered with a serious face "That's not blood, it's red paint . . ."

"Red paint? Why do dey put red paint on the booll?!"

I could sense Dad was thinking about something. Was he sorry he had taken me along? Too much for a kid? Or did he just want to watch the bullfight without so many interruptions? Years later he would proudly tell stories of how he had taken me to the bullfights and what a sport I was, a brave, great kid. But then, at the bullfight that first time, was there a pang of regret?

Not fully convinced, I asked about the red paint again.

Dad said, "The paint and the sticks are to make the show more colorful. But look! Now something really exciting is going to happen. And the bull will be able to go home."

The trumpet heralded the entrance of the main torero, the matador. Daddy was right, something really important was about to happen.

I could tell the bull was tired, his head was low, he had white foam coming out of his mouth. He moved his hooves kicking up some dirt, but he didn't run to the torero. He just stood there. The man talked to the bull, "aja toro," as he opened his cape and the bull finally decided to run into it. Then the man turned on his heels facing the bull once more and opened his cape again. The bull gracefully, with his horns bowed, ran through it again and once more, and then again. Everyone was watching closely, OLE! they shouted in unison each time the bull and torero moved to the rhythm of the cape. I thought it was beautiful.

Then the drums . . . Something is really going to happen now, I thought.

From under this cape, the torero takes out a sword. He is about twenty feet from the bull, who is panting, about to charge again. He lifts himself up on his toes taking aim with the sword and runs to the bull as it charges into him sliding the sword cleanly into the bull's neck, between his head and his shoulders. There's a pause, silence in the Plaza, and the bull falls to his knees, his head touches the ground, and very slowly he falls to his side. The crowd cheers, they yell "oreja" in unison. An ear for the torero's good performance.

"Daddee, Daddee what happenned?" I'm scared and seriously concerned about the bull now. Is he dead?

"The bull is very tired and is going to sleep now," Dad said, just as a team of two horses with two men chained the bull's horns to a contraption and dragged him out of the Plaza as the crowd applauded.

"Why are they taking him out like this?" I asked in a high pitch tone.

"Because he can't move, he's so tired."

"And why is everyone clapping?"

"They are clapping for the bull, because he was brave and fought well. They want him to know that, even if he's so tired he can't walk out by himself."

"And even if he can't really hear them because he's asleep," I offered.

Was I helping Dad with his story or did I really believe him? I probably wanted to believe him with all my heart because when he took me home that night I told my Mother how I loved the bullfight, the music and the

costumes. I had been a little worried about the bull being hurt and felt sorry for him, but felt much better when Daddy told me that he wasn't really hurt, and that the red stuff was paint and not blood, and that they carried him away because he was so tired. Mom listened quietly, and then in her matter of fact way said: "Susie, I think Daddy made a mistake, the bull does die and what you saw was blood."

But I didn't believe her.

The following Sunday I went to the bullfight again with Dad and Adele.

SECOND THOUGHTS

Back in 1955 children's rights were probably in a grey zone. TV programs showed perfect families, Donna Reed happily baking cookies for her kids and greeting her handsome husband at the door with a kiss. On the other hand we were read Hans Christian Anderson's and Grimm's fairy tales, which were poignantly sad, painful and frightening. Trauma, which is now a household word, was not even heard that often in reference to intense war experiences, much less applied to children's upbringing. Watching those bullfights could have turned into a traumatic experience for any five-year-old. While I was writing this piece, images of the bull brutally pierced by the picador or coming to his death by the sword of the matador made my heart race and the adrenaline flow. Nevertheless, in spite of my aching concern for the bull, regardless of whether I already knew it wasn't a show, but a real life battle, I kept going to the bullfights with Dad.

Did I love going to the bullfights with him? Of course I enjoyed the fanfare, the costumes and the music. And the excitement of the crowd, which was contagious. But what I *loved* was being with Dad. It became another way to bond with Norman that continued well beyond the actual bullfight. When I was fifteen Dad asked me to help him translate Federico García Lorca's *Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Méjias*: four poems about the death of his lover in the arena. According to Dad, Lorca's official translator[1] hadn't captured the beauty and rhythm of his poems, nor the pathos of the bullfight, the exquisite quality of the battle. We embarked on a joint venture: I would make a literal translation of the four poems and Dad would give it the poetic flavor. Our work was published in *Existential Errands*.[2] The book, dedicated to Barbara, to Susan, to Adeline and to Al, had the following inscription on the first page.

"Now that your name is in lights you may be ready for existentialism, dear M'gusu."[3]

NOTES

1. The translator was Spender Stephen. See Lorca, Federico García. *Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías.* Trans. Stephen Spender and J.L. Gili. Northampton: Apiary Press, 1957.
2. This translation can be found in Mailer, Norman. *Existential Errands.* New York: Little Brown, 1972. The reference is as follows: *Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías.* Copyright 1955 by New Directions Publishing Corp. Translation copyright 1967 by Norman Mailer. Translation first published in the *Poetry Bag* 1.6 (1967–68).
3. Dad made up names for all of his children as we were growing up. SusuM'gusu was one of his favorites for me.