

TOP TEN THINGS I LEARNED FROM NORMAN MAILER

PETER ALSON, DANIELLE MAILER,
ELIZABETH MAILER, JEFFREY MICHELSON

JEFFREY MICHELSON: WELCOME, THIS IS THE TOP TEN THINGS I LEARNED from Norman Mailer. And this came out when Norman died as I was called by *The Morning Call*, a daily newspaper that I used to write occasionally for, and I was asked to do an obituary. I thought that would be an interesting way to form the obituary. I wrote about my relationship to him. This is Peter Alson, who is Norman's nephew, and two of his daughters, Elizabeth and Danielle. As a Jewish kid growing up in the '50s, the most important thing that I could attach myself to, in terms of identity, was the fact that the idea of the Israeli Army appeared to be, pound for pound, the best army in the world. That Arthur Miller was getting to lie naked with Marilyn Monroe, and that Norman Mailer was like this tough guy intellectual who was a cross between a biker and a rabbi. [LAUGHTER]

I love Saul Bellow, and I like all these people, but none of them appealed to my sense of myself. So I really cared a lot about Norman Mailer, because he gave me a feeling of identity, that I wasn't alone in the world. And then it came out in 1966 when I met him and then in 1967 I went to work for him. And one of the great things that we've all shared, whether it's because he was my friend and an avuncular human in my life, where an actual uncle, or an actual father is that being connected to someone that brilliant, or a genius, you ended up getting things. And what I hope we can do today, my goal today is to entertain you, but I hope you walk out of here with something, or several things that we've said and you go "wow," because Norman said things to me in person, over a drink, on the phone, that changed my life forever. And almost always for the good. [LAUGHTER]

JM: I want to introduce Peter Alson, who is the author of the memoirs: *Confessions of an Ivy League Bookie*, and *Take me to the River*, as well as *One of a Kind in Atlas*. His articles have appeared in numerous national magazines including *Esquire*, *Playboy* and the *New York Times*. He lives in New York with his wife Alice, and their daughter Eden.

JM: Elizabeth Mailer is a writer. She is currently working on a memoir. Excerpts from her memoir have been published in *The Mailer Review* and *Provincetown Arts*. She lives in New York with her husband, Frank, a photographer, and their daughter Christina, a comedy writer. And we have Danielle Mailer, a Bowdoin College graduate. She is represented by the Berta Walker Gallery in Provincetown, and now in Wellfleet too. She has completed four giant public art, permanent art installations in Boston, Connecticut and New York. She lives in Goshen, Connecticut with her husband, jazz trombonist Peter McEachern.

JM: And their three adult children who visit often. And my name is Jeffrey Michelson.

Elizabeth Mailer: Would you like me to read that?

JM: No, I just never get that third person part.

[LAUGHTER]

JM: There's a whole thing going on . . . I tried speaking in the third person yesterday.

Danielle Mailer: No adding to it Jeffrey, 50 words, dude.

JM: Jeffrey Michelson. Two geniuses influenced Jeffrey Michelson. In 1967 he was Norman Mailer's houseboy/sparring partner. In 1971, John Lennon appointed him Apple Records' media designer. Michelson created the groundbreaking sex magazine *Puritan*, then enjoyed careers in advertising and book and website design. Mailer bequeathed a Foreword to Michelson's acclaimed erotic memoir, *Laura Meets Jeffrey*. Each of us will give our top ten things that we most loved and learned from Norman, and what we'll do is start at 10, and as we descend in number, we'll ascend in meaning. We'll save our more important ones for the end.

JM: We'll start off with Danielle.

DM: I'd like to start with a less than significant topic, but somehow very important in its own way, which is garlic. As many of you know, Norman was not a fan of garlic, except in escargot. That's the only place he ever saw garlic having its home. And so, growing up, as we started to learn to cook, the challenge was to slip a clove into the dish, without him noticing. Because nothing would make him more unhappy than if a sliver touched his palate when he wasn't expecting it. He would go from happy to gloomy very quickly. So we learned this as young children. But now he's gone, and I do my seven clove pesto, and I'm peeling those cloves, and throwing them in the Cuisinart, I'm giggling because I can hear him growling on the other side. [LAUGHTER] Let's see . . . Elizabeth?

EM: My number ten is that Norman taught me how to transform canned soup. Dad learned this, I believe, when he was a short order cook in the army?

JM: Yes.

EM: Specifically, a short order cook?

JM: Just a cook.

EM: Oh a cook. He wasn't up there in the ranks of short order cook

JM: No, better.

EM: Better? Okay.

JM: Yeah, higher up.

EM: So, you know, I watched him make this soup many times over the years and, once in a while, he would cook for the Mailer brood, and there were many lunches during the summer months, when we were all together, when there might be as many as 25 people. So, anyway, so here's the recipe. You combine 5 or 6 different kinds of canned soup. You add water. [LAUGHTER] Coarsely chopped onions, celery, carrots, and sliced hot dogs. Then you throw in whatever leftovers you find in your fridge, so it could be like pot roast, meat loaf, chicken, rice, potatoes, coleslaw, leftover cooked veggies, you know whatever, you just throw it all in. And you bring this mess to a boil . . . do you remember this? No?

EM: And then the seasoning is Tabasco, Worcestershire, chili sauce, ketchup, mustard, horseradish, salt and pepper, and then . . . as if that isn't enough, he'd toss in a half dozen leaves of iceberg lettuce and a couple of handfuls of green grapes. And you know what? Guess what? It was surprisingly tasty.

Peter Alson: Surprisingly is the key word. And I'm going to sneak in an extra one, because Danielle's garlic thing made me remember something that I learned from him—cutting boards. Norman wrote “no garlic” on one side of the cutting board because he didn't want a garlic taste affecting other things, which is something I've adopted. I have a cutting board that says “no garlic” on one side. [LAUGHTER]

EM: That's beautiful, that's right, I remember that.

JM: Do you have a food one?

PA: I do have a food one. I learned that the perfect gin and tonic consists of one part gin, two parts tonic, a quarter wedge of lemon, and a splash of soda. And you have to stir it with a fork so that oxidation happens. That was his recipe for the perfect gin and tonic.

JM: Bonnie taught him that. And there was another part of it, that he took the lemon around the rim. Put the lemon in first and then added the ice.

PA: Yeah. That's good. You learned better than I did. [LAUGHTER]

JM: In keeping with the food, one of the things that Norman taught me—and I think, honestly—the thing that comes up the most in my life is he taught me how to rehydrate a bagel. [LAUGHTER] Like if you have a bagel that's a day or two old, and it's a little bit stale, cut the bagel in half, and paint with water, cold water, the inside of the bagel, on the fleshy part. And then just toast it. And the outside is nice and crisp, and the inside gets out of the oven warm and it's brilliant, and I call it Norman Mailerizing a bagel. And Joanna will say, we have to Mailerize the bagels today. [LAUGHTER]

PA: Number 9.

JM: Number 9!

DM: So, boxing's the thing . . . I was the youngest sparring partner Norman had. At age 5, the gloves went on, because our Peruvian grandfather, Albert Morales, was a welterweight, or was a light heavyweight.

Elizabeth Mailer: He was a contender for light heavyweight on some level.

DM: He had some talent—and he was fast. When he met my father, he knocked him out, upon the first meeting. They started sparring, and he gave him a left hook, and down Dad went. And after that they had a great love affair, that was it. Norman was smitten. And he was hoping that I inherited some of Albert's talent as a boxer. [LAUGHTER] Although I wasn't particularly talented, I did have, as he put it, very mean Peruvian little fists. [LAUGHTER]

EM: So, this is onto another subject of driving. He had a whole ritual of how to stay awake at night when you're driving. Hey sibs, do you remember that? So there were these long trips up to Maine or Provincetown from New York, like 8 to 10 hour trips. I don't know why they were so long, but I would be in the back seat, sitting behind him, and I'd be sitting with Stephen or Kate, and then one of them would be in the front, so there were like four of us in the car. And he drank a lot of coffee, but about midway, he started getting groggy. So, the ritual began. The first thing was, he would steal ice from someone's take-out Coke and rub it on his neck. [LAUGH] But that didn't work. So then he'd turn on the radio and find a classic station and turn on Pavarotti, and he would sing, really loud, along with the Pavarotti, and he was tone deaf, so, you know it was quite an earful—it was quite a concert. [LAUGHTER] But still he was groggy. And so the next thing was to pull his hair. Like he needed me to pull his hair. But it had to be done a certain way. So I'd have to grasp the hair and if it wasn't done the right way he'd say, "No, no, no, don't do it this way, you're hurting me. Don't be mean. Don't pull it in a mean way, be . . . be . . . you know, be productive." [LAUGHTER] So I'd have to grasp his curls. I'd grasp the hair a certain way and tug it. And it would feel like tugging the fur of an animal. Then even after that, he was tired. So he'd roll down the window and it was chilly as we were moving up north. Then he'd try to scoop air with his cupped hand, from the open window, and try to wash his face with it. [LAUGHTER] And I would say to him, "Dad, you know, how can you scoop up air with your hands? That's physics, you know, you're defying physics." And he said "Yes, I'm bending the laws of physics." [LAUGHTER]

PA: All right, so as long as we're into the physical, I learned from him how to find balance. He was always intrigued by physical tests of balance, be it on

a bongo board or a tightrope. So I learned from him how to take on these very difficult feats of balance, and I think there's been a real carryover from that, to finding balance in my life with other things.

JM: I enjoyed the tightrope in the back of 565. He actually had a tightrope there, that we were all forced to go on.

PA: He also had one in Brooklyn.

JM: Oh yeah, in Brooklyn. He taught me how to make an unkempt house look clean in five minutes. We got a call one day, this Norman Podhoretz I don't know where he had come from, but unbeknownst to Norman, Norman Podhoretz was going to be over there in five minutes. So Norman got everybody together, maybe some of you kids were there and he said, put everything at right angles. He said, just put everything at right angles. [LAUGHTER] And he said, anything that's soft, grab all the soft stuff, like towels, or something like that, and take everything that's soft and throw it in the bathroom, the upstairs bathroom, and everything else—put it in right angles. Books, whatever it was, he just said that's all you have to do, and we did it, and the house looked great. All you have to do is put stuff at right angles, and it'll look like somebody thought about it, and kept it clean. [LAUGHTER] Number three!

DM: So we're up to three.

PA: Number eight.

DM: So, on the driving theme, Norman hated highways and large cars. He preferred back roads and his Porsche. This was our family car, which accommodated, nicely, seven children, with quite a bit of squeezing in and sharing laps. Sometimes inebriated, he was comfortable driving 80 miles an hour. We loved the speed. He loved a little car, fast roads, lots of children. He was apparently coordinated enough to get us to our destination unharmed, even with more than a few drinks. [LAUGHTER]

EM: So, the segue from highways to my next one isn't quite what you'd expect. We've been on the lighter side, but this one is pretty heavy, but is my #8. What he taught me in his own way, in his own life, was that every crisis, every hardship, is an opportunity for transformation. So I'm going to read a short scene from my memoir, and I'm going to read about an incident the night before he had his quadruple bypass surgery, so [READING]:

I called my father at the hospital the night before his quadruple bypass surgery in September 2005.

"How are you Dad?"

"Well, I've been psyching myself up for the surgery. It's really quite extraordinary," he said.

"How so?" I asked.

"The surgeon will cut open my chest, take out my heart, and keep it beating artificially from a machine outside my body. My heart will be in a technological sustained limbo. In this circumstance I could die, right there on the table, or I could come through it, and survive," he said.

"Are you scared?"

"No. Oddly enough I'm not scared," he said.

"Yeah, you sound really calm about it," I said.

"I feel calm," he said. "It's rather like the calm that is reserved for some sort of special initiation."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been reading the Iliad," he said. "Homer describes, in graphic detail the many bloody scenes on the battlefield of the Trojan War."

"Dad, why are you reading the Iliad the day before you go under the knife?" I said.

"Actually," he said, "I read it years ago, but I just had the instinct to pick it up again. Thought I'd read it while I'm in the hospital," he said. I laughed. "Diomedes kills his opponent Phineas with a spear to the chest," my father said. "It cuts him open from collarbone to sternum. It's not altogether different, as I see it, from the surgeon's incision during open heart surgery. In a profound sense," he said, "I identify with the warrior in the Iliad. I've been a warrior all my life," he said.

"Yes, Dad, you have been a warrior all your life."

PA: All right, we'll go back to the lighter side. [LAUGHTER]

EM: It's a little out of place.

JM: No, it was great, it was great.

DM: No, it's beautiful.

JM: It says good things about your book.

EM: Thank you, thank you, that's sweet.

PA: So, I learned from him, and actually we were all involved in this, that you could predict how baseball teams would do by analyzing the pitchers' biorhythms. He had some of the gambling gene that runs in the family, inherited from Grandpa, and he thought he was onto something with this idea. So he enlisted all of us to help him tabulate the pitchers' biorhythms. There were complicated charts, and there was a special calculator that would calculate it. But what we learned—and we all really learned the same lesson—was that it didn't work. [LAUGHTER] And the reason it didn't work is because even on a bad day, it turns out, a professional pitcher can pitch well. Even on a bad biorhythms day they can succeed. That's why they're professionals. And I think that's something he should have known beforehand, because he's the one who once said that being a writer means being able to do the work even on a bad day. So it was a costly lesson for all of us—but mostly for him because he was the one betting as well as paying us for our work.

JM: I'm just going to bring in something about writing. One of the things that Norman helped me with was to guide me to write my book. He taught me how to edit, and the key points that he taught me how to edit was, the most important thing was to read the words aloud, and tap your hand as you're reading the words to see how the meter is to the ear. And it works. That's how I learned how to edit, to sit and read the words out loud, and sometimes when I vetted it with Joanna, she'll read it [taps the table] and actually hearing the words spoken makes editing better.

EM: Yes. Nice. Do you think that's why his father, Barney, tapped the table? [LAUGHTER]

DM: So number seven, right?

JM: Seven.

DM: So, one of the things Norman passed on to his children was a deep and lasting commitment to Provincetown. His deep love affair for this intimate spit of land was contagious. I have only to catch sight of the Monument as we enter the East End, to know I'm home in the most profound of ways. I love my Provincetown more than any place on earth! Norman gave me, us, that gift.

EM: Dad taught me a lot about being congenial and making small talk with, you know, a delivery man, a cab driver, a waiter, just about anybody. And, some of you might remember, when we were teenagers, we were up in Mount Desert, Maine, for the month of August as we went almost every August for about 10 years straight, and we were driving. There were seven of us, as Danielle mentioned, a lot of us crammed into the small Porsche, and we were on our way to drive into the Dairy Queen, and Dad was driving for an ice cream. And the car was low on gas, and so Dad pulled into a service station, and the gas station attendant rushed out, and I just watched Dad because he was just very lovely with people all the time—well, except he was not always lovely with his kids, but . . . [LAUGHTER]

DM: Strangers.

EM: You know, lovely with every stranger. So, anyway, the gas station attendant rushed over and Dad unrolled the window and I noticed that he made eye contact with the guy and he would acknowledge him with a little nod of the head, and the hint of a smile, and then sounding like a small town Texan he'd say, "How do, sir?" [LAUGHTER] So I figured that's how you meet strangers, you just say, "How do, sir?" [LAUGHTER]

PA: Okay, so this is probably the biggest lesson I learned from him—namely, the enormous amount of discipline that's required of a writer. He was really the hardest worker I've ever seen, and the summer when I was 12 I stayed with him and my cousins at 565 Commercial Street, and every morning at 9:00 AM he would go up to the attic where his study was. There was a final steep set of steps, and then a swinging trap door that he would close behind him, and he would be up there all day. He wouldn't come down again until 9 o'clock at night. And I still think of that, whenever I'm taking stock of myself and my commitment to my own work. That's the benchmark. The only difference being that Norman was kind of a special case because he never really had any of the obligations that the rest of us do, like picking up the kids from school or doing the laundry or cooking dinner. [LAUGHTER]

DM: It was a different time.

PA: It was a different time. [LAUGHTER]

JM: I'll take a shot at one of them that's important. Norman taught me to respect mood, which I never really, until 1967, never really conceived of it as

something to be dealt with. I just thought it was something that occurred, and changed, and he said to me that the most important thing in a book or a movie is mood, and it has to flow like a river. That was his belief about good writing, good television, good movies, and it also applies to life beyond the page. You know, he taught me not to be the first one with a snarky comment with a loved one, and not to break the mood. That the mood needed to be respected, and don't use subtext as a weapon. Don't say something like: "Yeah, sure I'll be the . . . I'll bring that back to you." Don't break the mood with bad subtext. Walk about with your better angels on your shoulders. We all heard him talk about his better angels, and don't ruin the mood, and be aware that there is a mood, and don't be the first one to fuck it up. [LAUGHTER]

DM: Okay now, number 6.

JM: Number 6.

DM: To quote Picasso, "When the Muse arrives, don't be late." Norman followed that sentiment to the letter. He believed if you had a writing day, and you thwarted that plan, not only were you cheating yourself, but you're also cheating the cosmos. He conveyed this to his children sternly. And his fierce reprimand can be heard in my head whenever I procrastinate. "Stop the crap," he might say, "and get to work!"

EM: Since we're on the subject of writing, one of the things he would say about the writing process is (and I'll quote him): "Every writer must be a keen witness, and deep observer of everyday life. But that is just the first step." Right after 9/11, or a few days after 9/11, I was so overcome, as we all were, that I wanted to write about it. And so I just sat down and started to try to write about . . . to make sense of what I was seeing, the different images, the . . . well, . . . just the horror of it, just . . . we live on . . . Frank, and Christina and I live on East 20th, off First, and so right up . . . all the way up First from about up until about 34th Street every . . . every bus stop was plastered with people . . . with faces of the missing, and we're right by Bellevue, and NYU Hospital, we're by a lot of the major hospitals, so we would hear a constant throng of sirens, and . . . you know it was just a bombardment of sights, sounds, the horror of 9/11. We all have our experience of that. So, I wanted to start writing about it, and I was talking to my father about that and his response was, "You know, listen, you're not ready to write about 9/11,"

and I said, “Dad, why not?” He said, “You have to wait on it. The task of the writer is to observe . . . observe, digest, distill, and transform the experience.” And he said that much more time needs to pass before you’re able to do that.

JM: Yeah.

EM: So, I learned a lot from that from that exchange.

PA: All right, Danielle, I’m going to . . .

DM: You’re going to steal my . . .

PA: Well, it was mine first.

[LAUGHTER]

DM: Na-ah. You owe me a hundred bucks.

PA: Okay, yeah, I do. So, one of the things Norman used to say was, “Once a philosopher, twice a pervert.” That was one of his favorite expressions, and I absorbed that, and I took from that, especially as it pertains to writing, that it’s okay for a writer to try anything once for the sake of experience. But the second time around, a moral choice is involved. And, so if you do that thing a second time, you know what you’re up to, and you can’t justify it by invoking curiosity anymore, you’re responsible for it.

JM: And if you do it three times, I would call it a tic. [LAUGHTER]

Woman: And he said historian.

JM: And historian.

JM: Three times a historian. No, no, that was Larry. That was Larry.

PA: Three times a historian, yeah.

EM: Jeffrey, Jeffrey, what would that make you, based on your memoir, your sex memoir?

JM: What?

EM: What would you be? What would you call a thousand times?

JM: That’s a philosophy. I know it’s the only one . . . it’s the only book I’ve written like that. I did have sex more than once.

EM: And more than twice.

JM: I'll give you a sex one. Let's move on. What number are we at? Who's keeping track?

PA: Still six.

JM: One of the things I learned from Norman, and it's not that I learned it from him, he just solidified my knowledge. He said, "Jeffrey, sex has to be very, very good to be better than sex when you're stoned." [LAUGHTER]

PA: Yeah. True.

JM: All right. Five.

DM: So, since Peter stole my once a . . . , twice a philosopher, I'm quickly shuffling the deck and pulling out another Norman-ism. This was my favorite bedtime song as a child. I'm going to sing it to all of you in my Dad's tone deaf style, and it took me, in my 20s, to realize the meaning. [SINGS] Roll me over, in the clover, bring me down roll me over, do it again. [LAUGHTER] I'd say, "Daddy, one more time!" [SINGS] Roll me over . . . [LAUGHTER]

JM: That's great.

DM: Take it away, kid.

EM: My father was one of the most generous people I have ever known in my life. Probably the most generous. His generosity of spirit was just boundless, and his motto . . . his motto I think was about money, particularly. Don't be petty or tight-assed about money. You know, spend it, enjoy it, use it to improve the quality of your life. Live big, spend big. You know, money's a tool by which one can be magnanimous. And be sure to take care of family and friends, and people who work for you, and a lot of people in between. So, you know it's just . . . it's just extraordinary. I watched him, and observed him in all the ways that he was and there always seemed to be this abundant flow, particularly with money, and the irony of that is he was always in terrible debt. There were always debts and he spent more than he had. And yet it seemed to me sometimes like it was the loaves and the fishes, it was Jesus, there was just this magic and sense of miraculous about him when it came to the substance of money. Whether that's true or not, it's what I observed, and I sort of really integrated that and incorporated that, and I try to live that principle.

PA: All right, this is another physical one. I learned that knowing how to right an overturned kayak while you're still in it, though it's not something that you're necessarily going to need to get through life, it is still a good thing to know. [LAUGHTER]

JM: I like that.

EM: It's a great visual.

JM: What number are we on?

PA: We're still at five.

EM: Five.

JM: Norman taught me that good is the enemy of great. And that's really an important factor in just about everything. And I love this one. Good is so near great it makes us settle, and Norman taught me about knowing when to not settle. And sometimes you have to. Knowing the difference between good and great is the first step. And if time or money allow it, and it doesn't always, go for great. But the most important thing is to be accurate, and to have a fair estimation of where things stand on scales. That's it. Okay, number four.

DM: Number four. So, Dad always taught me to beware—he called it the totalitarianism of the totally pleasant personality. He said if someone is overly nice, excessively nice . . .

EM: Beware.

DM: Beware.

JM: Yeah, something's wrong.

EM: This is one about writing and in May of 2005 I was working on a novel. It's on the shelf on hold, because I'm now working on a memoir, but I waited 22 years to show my father my writing, and so in 2005 I was ready and I went upstairs to his attic, his studio in the attic at 627. I sat down with him at his desk in the attic and he sat and worked with me on the novel manuscript for five hours straight. And, you know, I learned so much in that session, but I think the most important thing that I learned was really about how to cut the fat, when to cut, and where to cut. And the thing that Dad said which I don't believe. He said, and I'm sure that he didn't make this up, because it's

a classic phrase that many of us writers know, so he he said to me, “First and foremost, you have to be willing to put to death your precious little darlings. And that’s the hardest thing for every writer.” And so in my sort of Shirley Temple-ingénue way, I was like, “Is that hard for you too, Daddy?” [LAUGHTER] And he said, “Well, you know, I’ve been known to give my editors a very hard time.” [LAUGHTER] We’ll leave it at that.

PA: All right. This is another one of his favorite phrases. As you all know, Norman loved to spar, both physically in the ring, but also verbally. And one of his favorite expressions was “You’re like an old club fighter. You get mad when I miss.” It was his way of both tweaking you and letting you know that the sparring, the trading of blows, while it might sting a little, was also an enjoyable compact.

JM: One of the things that Norman taught me was that whenever he had, whatever you had to pay to know the reality of a situation was worth the price. And he was very against sentimentality. He was very against anything that would shade the absolute, the fundament. His favorite was the undiluted essence of something in front of you, especially if it was blocking your way. You needed to know the reality of a situation. It didn’t matter whether it was good or bad. It didn’t matter whether it made you happy or sad. Paying the price to know the reality was the only way to succeed. What number are we at? Three?

DM: We’re at three now. So we have nearly exhausted the food theme, but I just wanted to share this last tidbit. When I used to come home from college, and stay in Brooklyn with my father and Norris, Dad would go out in the morning and get bagels at the local bagel shop and he’d come back with these gorgeous bronzed, giant, beautiful bagels. He’d go in the kitchen, cut it open and would scoop out the flesh of the bagel. Because he was always on some peculiar diet that only Norman could justify. He would gleefully explain to his incredulous daughter that this was a terrific way to avoid bread. And then he would go into the fridge and take out the cream cheese and fill it up to the brim. [LAUGHTER] And there was no sense of irony. It didn’t occur to him the ludicrousness of this action. WE dubbed this breakfast, “The Cream Cheese Bowl.”

EM: The cream cheese bowl. So, going back to 2005, and that session I had, the editing session I had with him, when he read the first 200 pages of my

novel and I didn't know what to expect. And one of the first things he said to me after reading it was, "Betsy, your voice is fierce." And I was sort of horrified at first. I had no idea—what did that mean to be fierce? Was that a bad thing? Was it a good thing? Was it a horrible thing? Was I an awful person? I just said "Dad, is that a bad thing?" And he said, "Hell no, fierce is good! Fierce means you will say what you have to say and not give a fuck whom you offend." [LAUGHTER] So I felt I had arrived, in some sense.

PA: Well, I guess this actually fits in with that. I learned from him that literature is thicker than blood, which is a line he used to pre-emptively short-circuit charges of nepotism when he blurbed my first book.

JM: Yes, so if I say that your book is good, it's not because you're my nephew.

EM: I mean he's a good . . . Can I just comment on that?

JM: Yes.

EM: He actually said to me once that he put out this premise. He said, "You know, if your house is on fire, Bets, who do you save? What do you save? You save your manuscript, or your partner?" [LAUGHTER] And I said "Dad, like . . . I mean, my God, like . . . do I even have to answer that question? Isn't it obvious?" And he was like, "You save your manuscript."

Man: Your answer better be your daughter.

EM: What?

Man: Your answer better be your daughter.

JM: I think so. Whatever it's going to be, I don't think they put it out there publicly. [LAUGHTER]

Woman: Now you would say it's in the iCloud.

JM: Exactly. I can save my daughter, and . . .

EM: I can save my daughter and my manuscript? [LAUGHTER]

JM: Where are we at? This is number three?

JM: Another Norman Mailer that happens to integrate itself into my everyday life like, you know, rehydrating bagels. He once said to me, are you happy with your toilet paper? [LAUGHTER] And I said, not particularly, not par-

ticularly not. He said, try Charmin. [LAUGHTER] with aloe and vitamin E. [LAUGHTER] And I did, and I've . . .

Man: You've never stopped using it.

PA: That was an important thing for him.

JM: It was. Did he turn you onto it also?

PA: He spent a lot of time on the throne.

JM: I thought he got a royalty from Charmin. [LAUGHTER] Now two.

DM: Two! We're almost there, guys.

JM: We're almost there.

DM: So, my Peruvian grandfather was married to my Spanish grandmother, Consuelo Morales, who fashioned herself after Mae West, and she had a line that Norman co-opted, which was, in a Mae West accent, she would say, "Kidding is kidding, but get your ass off my pillow." [LAUGHTER] And Dad loved that phrase, and he would use it regularly, and it was a wonderful way to control his children when we got too uppity. Instead of verbal lectures, he would turn to us and give us that "dead eye" and say, "Kidding is kidding," in his version of the Mae West accent, "but get your ass off my pillow." [LAUGHTER] And that with my own children, but it never worked. [LAUGHTER]

EM: So, I keep going back to the same period in 2005 when I came out of the closet as a writer and [LAUGHTER] and, yes, when I came out of the closet, I felt really vulnerable, and shy, and highly anxious about, you know what would people think as they were starting to read my work, and a lot of anxiety about what people would say or what they would think, and my father's response was, listen, you know, "Some will like what you write, others will hate it. Some will love it, and still others will be indifferent about it. And it does not fucking matter." I was talking to him on the phone, one day, about this and he reminded me of the many scathing reviews he himself had received, particularly on *The Deer Park*, *Barbary Shore*, and *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. And then he just reiterated. He said, "It does not matter what others think or say about your art. It's not about pampering your ego, it's about doing the work. It's about a collaboration between your unconscious and the cosmos, and it's nothing short of that."

EM: Just a little light talk . . . [LAUGHTER]

PA: So, I learned that being brave requires that you engage in something terribly risky, without the assurance that you will win, and for him, for me, and I think for any writer really, that kind of bravery is required every time you sit down at your desk.

JM: Well, I only got a tiny slice of him, by this, at one point being a singer in a band in England and the editor of a sex magazine, so I had a small payoff. But this gave me something to strive for throughout my several careers. Norman said to me, “The best thing about being famous is you get to fuck women you’d normally never get to fuck.” [LAUGHTER] And it became a religious mantra to me. [LAUGHTER]

EM: Hence Laura meets Jeffrey.

JM: Hence Laura Meets Jeffrey. And One! Bada-bing! Danielle?

DM: On Dad’s tombstone, appropriately, are the words he lived by: “There is that law of life, so cruel and so just, that one must grow, or pay more for remaining the same.” I have this quote taped to my computer, as a reminder to welcome challenge, sometimes with great fear and reluctance. Sometimes I get angry and say out loud No!! This was your MO not mine! But it’s inspiring to me, nonetheless, to have it there, and it keeps me pushing and growing and doing things out of my comfort level consistently. It is not an easy way to live, because there’s a lot of stress, but it’s an approach that he modeled daily. It is perhaps the most important life lesson he passed on to me, and I run with it, as much as my timid self can handle.

EM: You know, there were so many significant lessons, it’s hard to sort of choose what would be the #1 thing, but interestingly enough, my #1 is: shit or get off the pot. [LAUGHTER] Many of us know that phrase, but the thing is that I have a tendency to waver and dither, and this annoyed Dad to no end. I’m going to read you a little thing that I wrote about an example of this.

[READING]

So, when it was time to throw the bouquet at my wedding reception at 142 Columbia Heights, in February of 1988, I could not make up my mind, there were so many single ladies. To whom shall I throw the bouquet? I agonized

about this. There were just so many, you know . . . there must have been 15 single women, and they were all eager and all eligible and so lovely, and I wanted them all to have that opportunity to catch the bouquet. So, per tradition, I should have turned around, turned my back to them and tossed the bouquet over my head randomly. But instead, I faced the crowd and they watched me pluck individual flowers from the bunch.

PA: Petals.

EM: No, not petals, they there were like these individual flowers, and so I would snap off each flower, I mean, poor flowers, you know, snap each one off, one by one, tossing them to each of the women. And I did this 8, 9, 10 times, and then, from across the room, on the other side of the room this voice suddenly bellows, “Betsy, throw the fucking bouquet!” [LAUGHTER] It’s, you know, another way of saying shit or get off the pot. [LAUGHTER]

PA: All right, well number one on my list is very brief: I learned to mistrust lists of ten. [LAUGHTER] Or as he would say, please do not try to understand me too quickly.

JM: I think, without a doubt, the thing that mattered most to me that I learned from him was that he taught me to not allow myself self-pity. He said it in those words, and just the way he described mood. I had never heard anyone talk to me like that. No one ever used that kind of reference to actually look at it like that. And he said the most useful thing he taught me. He said, “Self-pity can become an attractive, melancholy comfort, and you must avoid it. It’s one of the worst vices, because it not only keeps you from altering the situation that needs to be changed, it’s a magnet for other vices.” Like drugs and alcohol and everything that’s too easy and are bad for you, gambling. “You can allow yourself sadness with cause for a certain time period, but for too long and too deep, it becomes self-pity.” Just really quickly, the night before I had a radical prostatectomy, because I had prostate cancer and I was almost crying, I said gee, I wonder . . . I called up Norman and I said, “Coach, I think I need some advice.” And I explained to him where I was, and I said, you know, am I okay to cry? You know, I didn’t feel comfortable. He said, “You can cry. This is like an extraordinary event,” he says. “However, if the operation doesn’t work out, and you lose your dick, and you can’t fuck any more, you call me up every month, and you’re crying, that would be self-pity.” [LAUGHTER]

DM: Wow.

JM: And I swear to God, that's almost word for word, and it was the night before the operation and I think it goes along with the bravery, and shit or get off the pot, and all the things that we've said, is that Norman was a big proponent of take a chance, don't give a fuck what people think. You're going to fail sometimes, and you're going to succeed. Don't feel sorry for yourself, and just go do it.

DM: Mm-hmm.

EM: Mm-hmm.

JM: And that's the end of my speech.

EM: Yeah. Yeah, great. [APPLAUSE]

JM: Two things I want to do, well, three things, but let me give Kate a pass, because we're going hear actually what she has to say. But I wanted to get Susan and John Buffalo to tell us, what's the biggest thing you learned from Norman Mailer?

DM: Absolutely.

JM: The one thing.

EM: And Barbara! Oh, well, but she's not one of the daughters.

JM: No, keep it just the kids.

John Buffalo Mailer: I'll start. I'd just have to say the one . . . the most important . . .

JM: All right, an important thing.

JB: Well, one lifesaving one was compartmentalize. That when things look dark, and you're worried about this loved one, and you've this deadline, there's no excuses. There's no reason why you shouldn't hit that deadline and take care of it, and it was when my mother was sick, the first time, and I literally was in that situation, she's got cancer, I've got a deadline, "Pop, I don't know how we're going to do it." He said, "Now is the moment when you learn to compartmentalize." And it's been a lifesaver.

JM: Yes.

EM: That's really good.

DM: It's special.

JM: Susan?

Susan Mailer: I think one of the things that I learned from him was to listen. He was a great listener, when he could listen. [LAUGHTER]

EM: When he could hear.

SM: And when he could hear also, but in general, when he could listen, when he sat down with you to listen, and you talked, he really listened. So I would say that that was one of the most important. I learned a lot of things from him, but that was one of the big things I learned. And also, in my profession, that's one of the things that I do. I listen.

PA: Yeah.

Barbara Mailer: I do have one.

JM: Oh great, Barbara.

BM: This was many, many, many years ago. I was talking to him about a situation in which I was unhappy, and he started suggesting some ways I could behave—it was an existential question probably—and I said to him, Norman, I can't do that, it's just not me. And he said, "Must you always be exactly who you are?" [LAUGHTER—APPLAUSE]

EM: That's fantastic.

DM: That's so beautiful.

BM: And it was interesting, you know, because he said, "Can't you act a little stronger than you feel?" I was very pissed at the time. The next time I got into a situation where I was feeling inadequate, I just sort of suddenly changed, and I did start behaving in a way that changed the whole meaning of the situation.

JM: Oh wow, great.

BM: And I came out of it with this existential lesson of learning that if you act stronger than you feel, you end up feeling as strong . . . you end up being as strong as you want to be.

JM: As you pretend.

BM: That's correct.

EM: That's fantastic.

Woman: How about Kate?

DM: She's going to be speaking.

Kate Mailer: No, I'm going to go, I'm going to go later.

JM: Yeah we're getting the big Kate. We're getting the big Kate.

Man: I wanted to ask Barbara . . . she wrote an essay about learning to drive from Norman in Europe, when his novel was published, and she said that Norman was not a great singer, maybe he wasn't a great driver, but he gave instructions on driving.

BM: He was a wonderful teacher. He was a wonderful teacher. [APPLAUSE]