DINNER AT THE FINLETTERS OR THE DRESS

BARBARA MAILER WASSERMAN

This excerpt is part of the author's recent memoir, Love of My Life.

DURING THE SUMMERS THAT NORMAN WENT TO MAINE, I generally came to spend a week. In 1975, Norman picked me up at the airport in Bangor, and as we drove the fifty miles to Mount Desert, he informed me that during the week I was to attend a dinner party at Eileen Finletter's home in Bar Harbor. She had invited Norman, but when he told her that both Carol, mother of his daughter Maggie, and I, were going to be staying with him, she said, "I don't have room at the table for everybody. Send Barbara for dinner and you and Carol come later." Twenty-five years earlier in Paris, I had spent a little time with Eileen and Stanley Geist. But I had not known them well, nor had I seen them since. Eileen and Stanley had divorced, and she was now married to Tom Finletter, a man many years her senior. He had held a number of government posts under Roosevelt, and had been the Air Force Secretary in the Truman administration. I was curious, but not entirely happy at the prospect of going to the dinner alone. Well, I thought, at least I brought a dress that I can wear.

It was a dress I had bought in San Francisco a year earlier. I had seen it in the window of a shop in Ghiradelli Square, a long, loose crinkly thing (it was the era of the muu-muu). There was no shape to it, but it was the color of the sky on a glorious day, and I knew immediately that I had to have it. What instinct made me take it to Maine, I do not know.

THE MAILER REVIEW, VOL. 15, NO. 1, FALL 2021. Copyright © 2021. The Norman Mailer Society. Published by The Norman Mailer Society.

The day of the dinner was also a day on the sailboat. Remaining true to my niece Danielle's description of us as the Polish Navy, we got becalmed and arrived home much later than planned. Realizing that the dress was soiled, I threw it into the washing machine, then the dryer, then on myself.

I was still feeling a bit breathless when I arrived at the Finletter's—an old gracious New England home. I wasn't late, but the eight or ten people who had already arrived looked very old and very Wasp. My heart sank at the prospect of what I thought would be a stiff evening.

After greeting me, Eileen introduced me to Tom, who led me to the bar to get a drink. As he poured we exchanged pleasantries. Or rather what passed as such since everything I said seemed to elicit a non sequitur. Not until he ushered me to a seat did I realize that he was quite deaf.

Sitting next to me was a pretty elderly lady with white hair and eyes the color of my dress. Neither one of us quite knew how to begin a conversation. We exchanged names. There was an awkward pause. Finally she said with some genuine enthusiasm, "That's a beautiful dress you're wearing."

Following her eyes, I looked down at my dress. And a huge bubble of glee welled up in me. All the seams were showing. I was wearing it inside out.

What the hell, I thought, we're all nuts. Suddenly I felt perfectly happy and ready to have a good time.

In fact it turned into a memorable evening. More people arrived and we were ushered to dinner. In the small low ceilinged dining room two tables had been set with twenty places of fine china, crystal and silver. We filed in silently, searching for our placecards, but once we sat down and everyone began to talk, the sound ricocheted back and forth, up and down the room, creating a din to rival the trendiest of New York restaurants. It was an unseemly racket. Once again I had to stifle a giggle, and my mood went up another notch.

I turned to the man on my left. He was Bowden Broadwater, a former husband of Mary McCarthy, and a classmate of Norman's at Harvard where they had both been on the *Advocate*, the literary magazine. A small, fairhaired man, he had a gentle air and he spoke barely above a whisper. In the hubbub around us, I could distinguish only about one word in three. My responses to him may have seemed as bizarre as Tom Finletter's had seemed to me. However I did hear enough to garner the somewhat astonishing information that while he had an administrative position at an exclusive girl's school in Manhattan, he had arranged things so that he worked only half a year. This

left him a great deal of time to do the two things he most liked—namely, read, and be a house guest, preferably combining the two. He knew enough people in the Northeast to have cased the library in just about every small town in New England. I was much impressed.

However, given the strain of trying to hear what he was saying, it was rather a relief when midway through the meal, we all turned, British fashion, to our other dinner partner. Mine was Bruce Mazlish, a psychoanalyst who wrote psychobiographies, a genre about which I had doubts but considerable interest. Perhaps because we were two Jews in a den of Wasps, we got along famously, and leaning back toward the windows behind us, we could hear each other quite well. He was about to have a book published by my employer, Simon & Schuster, and he was ticked off at his editor because she wanted to delay his publication date. When he had finished complaining, and I had tried to offer him some sympathy, he suddenly changed the subject and said, "Tell me, what was it like growing up with Norman?"

For many years after *The Naked and the Dead* was published, this had been the kind of question that raised my hackles. Over time, however, I had come to accept that no matter how much I might want to escape it, Norman was part of my identity, and my being his sister would color the way people perceived me. But when Bruce posed the question, for the first time I felt eager and happy to answer it.

"It was wonderful," I said. And then I went on to talk about how much fun Norman had been and how well he had always treated me, like including me in the Monopoly games he played with his friends when I was only ten years old, or the long walks into other neighborhoods of Brooklyn, looking for an iced over tennis court where we could skate (mostly we just got frozen feet), or taking me to the movies on Saturday afternoons—those four hour sessions of two features, a serial and a cartoon, which sometimes stretched to five hours if we had come in the middle of one of the features and stayed on to watch it from beginning to end. Most of all, how much confidence he gave me when I was an adolescent, by telling me that I was pretty and intelligent. What I had actually been feeling at the time was that I was awkward and inadequate, but since I took everything Norman said as Gospel, I began to believe it.

A look of pain crossed Bruce's face. "Oh," he said, "I didn't do that for my sister."

For me, it was a moment of epiphany, the realization that brothers, let alone extraordinary brothers, didn't always do that for their sisters. How fortunate I had been.

A POSTCRIPT.

Many years later, Norman and my husband Al, both became quite deaf. Since my voice is small and soft, the give and take of easy communication evaporated, and they both preferred to believe that the problem was mine. "Project," Norman would snarl. And Al continued to ask me questions from a room or a floor away, when it was obvious he would not hear the answer, expecting always that I would come to him.

One day, musing about all this, I remembered Tom Finletter's deafness. I had always rather conventionally assumed that Eileen's attraction for Tom had been the younger wife and all that. But suddenly I thought of Eileen's voice, which was very deep, almost baritone, and I realized, of course, he could *hear* her.