

[BOSTON STATE HOSPITAL:
THE SUMMER OF 1942]

ROBERT F. LUCID

Editor's Note: The following excerpt comes from the manuscript of the late Robert F. Lucid's incomplete authorized biography of Norman Mailer. He died in December of 2006 before he could complete it. The editors are grateful to his son, John Michael Lucid, for granting permission to The Mailer Review to publish this excerpt. It is taken from chapter 2 of the manuscript, which deals with Mailer's brief but memorable experience at the Boston State Hospital in the summer between his junior and senior years at Harvard. The title was provided by the editors, as were the words in brackets.

NORMAN, HAVING BECOME ALL BUT INSEPARABLE from [his future wife] Bea [Beatrice Silverman], had tried since the start of the second semester [January 1942] to spend as much time in the Cambridge/Boston area as possible, and of course his family noticed his increasingly elaborate excuses for not coming home, as well as the cut-short vacations. He drove the nearly expired car down in early May, so that Fan [Mailer, his mother] could either sell or junk it, but the visit was a very short one. Uncle Dave [Kessler] had offered to help Norman if he encountered financial difficulties in his plan to spend the summer in Boston, but Fan remained concerned. Norman had always come home to his family, specifically to Long Branch [New Jersey], during the summers, and though the Scarboro [Hotel] was no more, Aunt Beck had a place for him in Monmouth Beach [where Mailer's mother's family operated resort hotels].

Instead, he insisted on staying in Boston. As always, Fan finally came around to seeing things Norman's way, but she was not reassured by one of his most central arguments in support of his plan. Earlier in the spring he had applied for and received his first social security card, and he already had landed a job, he told her: starting June 12 he would be earning \$15 a week plus room and board as an attendant at the Boston State Hospital. It was a public facility for the emotionally disturbed, and locally it was referred to as the insane asylum.

Norman moved out of Dunster House and on Friday, June 12, moved into the West Wing of the Male Attendants' House of Boston State Hospital, whose buildings were laid out campus-fashion on grounds at 591 Boston Centre. With him came Douglas Woolf, a student-writer who had appeared with Norman in the May [*Harvard*] *Advocate*, and the two undergraduates began a schedule of twelve hour days as apprentice-attendants.

Assigned to assist the veteran attendants, they mopped the lounges and wards and helped herd the inmates around from sleeping to recreational to eating areas, monitoring them in their routine activities and getting sunburnt with them in the outdoor exercise compounds. Crushed by the workload and shocked by the brutality of the attendants and other staff members, Norman and his friend quickly realized that they were in over their heads. Woolf left at mid-week and Norman lasted just eight days before he collected \$20 in salary and plunged through the streaming dark of a rainstorm to seek shelter at Bea's family home in Chelsea. There he called his parents in Brooklyn, told them something about how difficult the hospital job had been, and explained that he was going to find another job in Boston to support himself as he stayed there and wrote for the rest of the summer.

Norman's experience at the hospital made an enormous impression upon him, as subsequent events would reveal, but for the moment he had little time to think about it. He moved into a one-room Boston apartment at 4 Otis Place, which he shared with Woolf and another writer-friend, and began canvassing the town for a job. Having been turned down by the personnel offices at Harvard University, the Boston Navy Yard, and every newspaper in town, he finally was hired by the C. F. Hovey Company, a department store, as a counter-attendant in its large soda fountain: 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., Monday through Friday, \$18.00 a week and free meals. "Did a full day's work today," he reported on

June 23, “and found it rather pleasant. Much better than the insane asylum.”

[...]

Predictably, Norman didn’t stay long in the soda fountain. Less than two weeks after starting it he quit and went to work for “board” but no salary as a press agent for the Joy Street Playhouse. He wrote home enthusiastically:

I write releases for them, see to poster distribution, talk to the drama critics of the newspapers, fill in an acting walk-on part if necessary, watch rehearsals, listen to the audience comments.... It’s a wonderful opportunity.

The theatre was in a carriage house at 36 Joy Street, on Beacon Hill, seating 100 people at most. It housed a group called The New England Repertory Company, which during the weeks of Norman’s association, produced *Criminal at Large*, by Edgar Wallace, and *The Vinegar Tree* by Paul Osborne.

Norman explained in a letter to his parents that he would work for the theatre, prepare a play of his own, and accept some financial support from his Uncle Dave.

Since I’ll see a play from selection to casting through rehearsals, and direction, and staging, I’ll learn the theatre inside out which is what I need if I want to write plays. Besides, it’s journalistic experience: I get to know all the newspaper tricks, get to know the reporters and drama critics, and have a chance to break into the newspapers with a feature story.... I worked today and I *loved* it.

As a closing remark, he adds: “It’s a good deal better than minding lunatics or wrestling dishes.”

The theatre was certainly modest, asking for a minimum 50-cent contribution as admission, but it had been in operation for twenty years and, under the direction of Catherine Huntington, was locally respected. A feature story about the Playhouse appeared in *The Boston Globe* at the end of that summer, and in stressing the youthfulness of the company it mentioned the names of some of the younger associates. “Harvard senior Norman Mailer, 19, of Brooklyn N.Y.” it said, “helps with publicity.”

Thanks to the generosity of both his parents and Uncle Dave, Norman moved to a better room at 4 Otis Place, where he welcomed his mother for

a late-July visit. He had asked Fan to bring his sister, Barbara, but Fan may have wanted to come by herself so that she could discover, undistracted, what this Boston business was all about. As if to answer the question, Norman took her to the Joy Street Playhouse for a performance, and it is even possible that he introduced her to Bea before hurrying his mother back onto the train for home.

The rest of the summer passed in an organized way. In Bea's company during the previous year he had developed an interest in modern painting. Typically, this led him to consider the operation of his own creative imagination, so he bought some sketch-pads, oils, and brushes, and began to experiment during the summer with sketching and painting on his own. He kept in touch with the extremely active summer community in Cambridge through Signet and the Harvard Dramatic Club, and when the Joy Street Playhouse offered a Harvard Summer School special performance, Norman recruited twenty people to attend. In mid-August he and Bea went out to a Cambridge cocktail party co-sponsored by Signet and The Dramatic Club, in honor of Paul Robeson, Uta Hagen, and Jose Ferrer, among others, who must have been appearing in a touring production of *Othello*. The rest of his time he divided between swimming at the beach with Bea, working at Joy Street, reading, sketching an outline for a novella that would occupy him at the end of the year, and taking notes in preparation for writing a play based on his time at the State Hospital.

His most dramatic experience there had taken place about halfway through his eight-day stay, and so hypnotically did it affect him that he could readily recount it in interviews thirty-five and forty years later, always with perfect consistency of detail:

A colored kid went ape, a kid I knew, in another ward. He'd broken a table, and he had the two legs in each hand for clubs. The attendants were moving in on him with mattresses, trying to smother him back into a corner. But he broke through, and I tackled him. Then they closed in on him and took turns beating him until they knocked him unconscious, which took a while because he was tough. I didn't hit him, but I knew I was perhaps three months away from that kind of thing (Brock Brower, "In This Corner, Norman Mailer: Never the Champion, Always the Challenger," *Life*, September 24, 1965).

He wanted to write about it, and he also wanted to take Bea down and introduce her to more of the family, and an invitation from his Aunt Beck provided the perfect opportunity for both. The aunt with whom he had spent so many summers at the Scarboro was living this summer in Monmouth Beach, close by Long Branch. She may or may not have been leasing a hotel, but she had some kind of accommodations and she wanted her nephew to visit her. So toward the end of the month Norman took a midnight bus down to Brooklyn, stayed only a day, and then proceeded to his Aunt's [house]. Bea, in turn, took a bus to Monmouth Beach, and the couple presented themselves for inspection.

Bea's famed self-possession must have taken something of a testing as [his aunts] Beck and Rose and Jennie, not to mention the numerous cousins led by the formidable Osie, came to meet the girl that must have been the subject of much conversation. The parties all seem to have got on reasonably well, and Bea took the bus back as Norman settled into prepared quarters to address his "insane asylum play." He began it on August 31, worked steadily for two weeks, and completed the 113-page typescript on September 14.

The specific action of the play does, indeed, center around the subduing and subsequent beating of a young black inmate, a dope addict, who has run amok. The episode—which is played off stage—is employed, however, to illumine the nature of institutions, and to address the question of how brutality is elevated to a level of social respectability by originally decent and civilized people. The play's central characters are David Land and Ralph Hughson, undergraduates who have come to work as attendants for the summer. Ralph is pre-med, self-confident and successful at adjusting to the job, while David, a School of Social Work student, is struggling, full of self-doubt, and something of a failure as an attendant.

The two students are aware that in normal times they would never have been hired as attendants, for they are hardly typical of the people who work in the hospital, but the manpower shortage created by the war has got them their jobs. They work in a world designed to control rather than rehabilitate the inmates, and the control is exercised by a variety of devices, chief among which is the technique of supervision developed by the staff of attendants, or "Hacks," to whom Ralph and David are apprenticed. In the absence of effective medication, the Hacks rely on cigarettes (the air of the play is dense with clouds of tobacco smoke), and on regimented routine in the moving of wards full of patients through sleeping, eating, and recreational

schedules. Control is also exercised through cajoling, humoring, and even of affectionate bonding with cooperative patients; but the central, indispensable technique is brutality. If the patients will submit to control for no other reason, they submit because they are afraid.

Fear, for Norman, had probably always been the most authentic emotion; certainly he made it so in his fiction. But when he got to the hospital and for the first time in his life encountered the administration of fear as public policy, the shock of recognition seems to have penetrated through to the deepest center of his imagination. There is a symbolic resonance in the intensity of his response. His title for his play, "The Naked and the Dead," was to remain associated with him for the rest of his life, haunting with its cadence the inner ear of the postwar literary world. Its specific meaning in the play speaks to the interplay between the brutalized and the brutal, the patients and the attendants, to be sure, but also all fearful victims everywhere who are submitting to the unfeeling dominance of all enforcers.

When Ralph and David argue the matter at one point in the play, David takes it out of the context of hospitals and clinically identifiable patients by saying: "This all happened on a bigger scale in Germany. Germany is like an attendant!" David is clearly the autobiographical figure in the text, and his clumsy ineffectuality as an attendant is presented as a major point in his favor. Just as Norman had done, he tackles an out-of-control patient, who is then beaten into unconsciousness by the other attendants. The patient is next taken to a hydrotherapy treatment room, where he is immobilized and immersed up to his neck in water as a pacification technique. Whatever the intrinsic value of the treatment, in the hands of the attendants in this room—which include a brutal male hack and the amorous Nurse Marion Gannon—the process is merely a method of frightening and, when necessary, torturing helpless patients into a state of abject obedience.

David decides to appeal to the authorities in the hospital in order to expose and arrest the brutality, an attempt that triggers the real action of the play. Aware of his intentions, the other attendants meet and conspire to frighten David into resigning from his job and leaving the hospital without sounding the alarm. Their intention is to trap him into being beaten by a crazed patient, and they persuade Ralph to work with them against his erstwhile friend. A very considerable strength in the play is the persuasive way the attendants reason, both with Ralph and with each other. Far from seeing themselves as cruel or sadistic, they believe their own actions to be nec-

essary to the successful operation of an otherwise anarchic hospital. They indict the hospital administrators, doctors, and head nurses as unrealistic bureaucrats who hypocritically endorse unworkable codes of staff conduct; and this aspect of their argument is in a sense proved true by David himself.

Desperately though he tries, David is never able to find a sufficiently responsible supervisor with whom he can lodge his complaint. Neither the doctors nor Supervisor Nurse Tashko are interested. As he attempts to find them, David is warned of the plot against him, so that when the violent patient is unleashed upon him he is able to defend himself. In the fight to bring the patient under control, however, David is horrified to discover a thrill of pleasure in himself as he beats the man into submission. He and Ralph finally see the hopelessness of staying on at the hospital, so they both resign and leave for what they hope will be a restorative fishing trip.

Though his play is by no means lacking in power, Norman found himself unsure about it—it was, at most, only the second one he had tried to write—and he resolved to get some reactions to it before considering further revision. When he takes the story up again the following spring, it will be to re-envision the action in the form of a long and tortured novel [*A Transit to Narcissus*, published in a facsimile edition by Howard Fertig in 1978] but first he had a few things he needed to do. Earlier in the summer he had been reading Malraux, and was struck by a line in *Man's Fate*: “All that men are willing to die for, beyond self-interest, tends ... to justify that fate by giving it a foundation in dignity.” He thought that “The Foundation” might be just the right title for a novella he had been planning, and he wanted to start on it as soon as he was free. Claiming first priority, however, was the need to move out of Aunt Beck’s, pull his things together in Brooklyn, and get started on his senior year at Harvard.