**Norman Mailer: The Rise and Fall of a Friendship**



**Mailer: Years after Dunster House C-Entry**

A clip from a long letter to me at the NACA, Langley Field, Virginia,

Sent via V ... - -- Mail (Army mail; passed by the censor) :

*"Pvt. Norman Mailer, 42127367*

*HQ, 112th RCI*

*APO 70 c/o P.M. San Francisco, Calif.*

*19 February, 1945*

*Dear Phil:*

*\*\*\**

*I've seen a little combat, a lot of Japanese corpses -- just like the Cocoanut Grove--and I've been in a convoy that was mildly attacked by planes, but it's really not been too much. Right now I'm in a hospital in the suburbs of a very large city which we are still fighting for. No Purple Heart, just Yellow Jaundice. But there is artillery going all the time, and it helps to dispel the boredom.*

*I'm not sure about your address, so I'm damned if I'll take up too much space. But answer this, and I'll give you a real eppissell* [sic] *instead of a catalogue.*

*Give my love to Handy* [college nickname for Hadassah] *-- she's one of the few nice people I've known, and try to stay out of the Army; once you're in you lose sight of everything."*

*\*\*\**

*Norman "*

From another letter, dated April 17, 1945. President Roosevelt died on April 12th, 1945, and the letter begins by putting down Harry Truman. Then:

"  ***\*\*\****

*I got a new job, the kind of job where you ride around in a Jeep all day, and occasionally sweat out a bad stretch where Japs can be around. Once I was fifty yards from a Jap that was killed, and later we argued whether one of the shots had passed within five yards of us or not. The whole thing is a little unreal --as one would suspect -- but the emotion involved if anything is mystical rather than dramatic. Page a point for Hemingway. He does it very well.*

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*Norman "*

These were some of the experiences, which when elaborated in his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead,* (1948)*,* catapulted Norman into a meteoric career as one of the foremost American literary personalities of his generation.

But I'll start with events in the Fall of 1939.As a freshman, I was living in the middle entry of Thayer Hall at Harvard. Norm roomed with Martin Lubin at the other end of Thayer. Through Martin, who was a classmate of mine in a mathematics course, I met up with Norm. Our friendship did not gel until our sophomore year when Norm lived in C entry Dunster House and I lived in E entry. Both he and I were taking writing courses and were particularly interested in the short story both as a literary form and as works that we both wanted to produce. We met frequently and talked over these matters. Late in the evening, we would frequently walk over to the Eliot House Grill where I would get an egg salad sandwich and a soda. Norm probably ate a hamburger.

I had two interests in those days; mathematics and writing. The short story was then in its heyday; magazines such as *Colliers,* *The Saturday Evening Post*, ran them regularly, often illustrated by name commercial artists. The short story itself changed its nature becoming what has been called "The New Yorker" type story, less of a story than a wry or snide gloss on a minute fraction of life. With the arrival of TV and soap opera, the magazines went into a decline, and disappeared. The short story lingers on -- just barely.

In the '30's and '40's the principal outlet for non-commercial short stories was *Story Magazine,* founded and edited in 1931 by Whit Burnett and Martha Foley. I was an avid reader of *Story Magazine* and a collector of its back issues. I had read Poe, de Maupassant, Tolstoi, and a few more of the old timers. Among contemporaries, I had a fondness for Sherwood Anderson. I did not care for Hemingway.

In 1941, in his sophomore year, Norm won *Story Magazine's* college competition with a submission titled *The Greatest Thing in the World.* I must myself have produced some short stories for my writing class taught by Albert J. Guerard, Jr., but I now have no recollection and cannot find any trace of them. With this class, my college days of fiction writing were over; I had other fish to fry in mathematics, physics, philosophy of science, yet my interest in the short story persisted.

It was otherwise with Norm. Once, when I was in his room, he opened his closet , and there, stashed away and piled high were notebooks filled with stories or novels he had written in high school. I saw immediately that I was not in the same literary league and would never be.

In retrospect, my friendship with Norm could be considered as an association of opposites. He was short, sinewy, athletic and pugnacious ; I was tall, slender and very much unathletic. I've heard that when we walked together we were dubbed "Mutt and Jeff." Norm was a smoker; I was not. In those days, when men's pants all had turned up cuffs, Norm used to knock his cigarette ashes into his cuffs when he could find no ash tray. This was a "statement." His views on many issues were opposite to mine. Though he didn't invent "macho", he plugged into it, and elevated it to new depths (if I may put it that way.) He played the tough guy. Later on he sparred with a professional boxer. Hadassah reminded me that Norm was the only person we knew who would use the f--- word in mixed company. Was he a trend setter or was he merely picking up on a degradation of language that had already set in ?

Though I do not and did not think of myself as a shrinking violet, I would say that in contrast I must have seemed to have been one. I used to think -- and think seriously -- that Norm didn't really mean what he said and how he acted but that he was just play-acting. He switched from a Brooklyn accent (perhaps he never had one) to what I considered was a somewhat arty British kind of pronunciation with carefully selected words. It was clear to me that Norm was very consciously and deliberately constructing a persona for himself. He was no longer just a little guy from Brooklyn.

Norm was interested in describing what might be called the brutal, violent aspects of existence; I, on the other hand, went for the satiric. Hemingway was his idol and he prolonged and intensified the Hemingway manner of writing, while I started to worry whether logical positivism was an apt description of the scientific process. Norm had a primitive or an undeveloped sense of humor. His frequent idea of joke was to insult someone and then laugh. This was fine provided that you were not the butt.

I visited him once in his parents' apartment in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, which, in those days, was a solid Jewish neighborhood. In contrast to Norm, I found that his parents were mild sort of people and in later years, I wondered how they adapted to their son who had become the literary bull in the china shop.

In late November, 1942, there was a terrible fire in the Cocoanut Grove night club in downtown Boston in which almost five hundred patrons lost their lives. Many of the victims were members of the Armed Forces (recall: Pearl Harbor was on December 7, 1941.) The bodies were laid out somewhere for identification. Norm went down to the makeshift morgue to experience the tragedy at first hand. I don't believe he was looking for any person in particular; this was just part of accumulating experience.

Despite the fact that I was longer producing fiction, I maintained both my interest in short stories and novels. I hung out with the "literary crowd" and well as the "mathematical crowd." I read through the works of Theodore Dreiser, Thomas Hardy, and Sinclair Lewis. (Hardy and Conrad were favorites of my teacher Al Guerard; he wrote books about them.) I couldn't stand Conrad. I kept up my interest in the short story by reading the annual anthologies *"Best Short Stories of 19 xx* ". Apparently, an "aura of the literary" still clung to me because both Norm and Ricky Leacock ( pioneer of cinema verité ) wanted to put me up for membership in the exclusive Signet Society -- an undergraduate society devoted to literature and the arts. Over more than a century, this society has had many members who became famous. I was flattered but demurred -- I couldn't afford the initiation fee and I didn't want to borrow the money.

While the Signet Society did not put out publications, many of its members were associated with the *Advocate*, an undergraduate literary magazine. From time to time the members of the *Advocate* threw parties in its quarters, and I recall that Norm invited me to one where it was promised that the then famous novelist Somerset Maugham would be present. Lots of girls were there, including the famous college "whore", whose name I've long since forgotten, so a good time was had by all. Of course, Maugham never showed up; it was just a hoax arranged by *Advocate* writer Bowden Broadwater (who later married Mary McCarthy after she had divorced critic Edmund Wilson.)

With the declaration of war, came the draft, the rationing of foodstuffs and gasoline, and a scarcity of labor that was reflected in that we were no longer served "as young gentlemen" in the dining halls, but relied on self service. A sobering attitude towards life hung about us like a heavy mist. The future seemed at worst no longer to exist or at best to be simply irrelevant. Little by little, classmates disappeared as they were absorbed into the machinery of war. Undergraduates who majored science were draft- deferred until graduation. Both Norm (who majored in engineering) and I (who majored in mathematics) benefited from this delay.

Though the prospects for the future appeared dim, this did not interfere with the boy meets girl process. In fact, I believe it intensified it.

I met Hadassah Finkestein on a picket line in Boston where we and a delegation of students were picketing an anti-war meeting featuring the right-wing but famous aviator Charles Lindberg. From that day on we were together and still are. Norm met and dated Bea Silverman whom I met occasionally. We were both married young. In those problematic days, this was not that unusual. But Norm's marriage fell apart and he and Bea were divorced in 1952. I've read that he's been married to six different women and this will explain a remark he made to me and that I've reported a few paragraphs below.

Eventually June, 1943 came around; graduation day for us. Both of us would be off for we couldn't tell what, where, or when. Would we return ? And if so return to what, where or when ? Norm came around to my room in Dunster E-51 to say good bye and to give me a good bye present. It turned out to be the hand written scribbled over manuscript of his prize winning *Story Magazine* submission *The Greatest Thing in the World.* Well,we said goodbye and promised to keep in touch-- and we did after a fashion. Years later, Norm's prominence magnified the value of the manuscript. I donated it to the Brown Library and took a tax write-off. If interested, you can find it there : coded as [Ms. 93.9 Codex](http://josiah.brown.edu/search/lMs.+93.9+Codex/lms+93+9+codex/-3,-1,,E/browse), in the Hay Library.

After graduating, Norm was drafted into the Army and served in the Philippines in the 112th Cavalry. I wound up in the Air Force Reserve, assigned to the NACA, at Langley Field Virginia (the predecessor of the present day NASA) where I served as a fledgling aerodynamicist. The letters quoted at the beginning was part of a serious but infrequent correspondence while I was at the NACA. After the war, I went back to graduate school to get a Ph.D. in mathematics, while Norm and Bea went to Paris where he wrote and wrote.

Norm's first published novel ,*The Naked and the Dead,*  appeared in 1948 and was an immediate hit. A *succès fou* at the age of 25. Can a successful first novel become a dead end for a writer ? I've seen it happen, but in Norm's case, it proved to be a terrific jump start. After that, there was no stopping him ; he was all over the map. And with that success began the decay of our friendship.

Does early success affect character ? In Norm's case, I believe it did. He was immediately thrust into the world of literary and Hollywood stars, and acted the part to the hilt. Of course, inevitably, I had also changed. My interest in the short story evanesced. My interest in the novel went down practically to zero. Why read about situations that were already familiar to me or that I didn't care to know about ? Though the overlap of our interests became smaller and smaller, we still met on occasion.

Sometime in 1949 or 1950, he invited us to a party that his sister, Barbara, was throwing in her apartment at 420 Riverside Drive. I remember the address because Hadassah and I used to visit friends in the same apartment house. The rooms were crowded with types of educated humanity that I hardly knew existed. Norm was holding forth, surrounded by an admiring circle of Groupies. He was geometrically unapproachable. Hadassah and I milled about. I was approached by a slightly drunk psychoanalyst who asked me whether I believed in Original Sin. I answered him that like all Freudian concepts, I didn't know whether Original Sin really existed but that it might be a useful supposition. My questioner moved on to buttonhole another guest. I suppose I could have parlayed that party experience into entrée into a very gamey circle, but it would have taken more energy than I could spare from working on my Ph.D. thesis.

We met a few times after that party. The break came one afternoon when Mutt and Jeff were walking up Broadway. We had little to talk about of mutual interest. Norm's reputation in the world of stardom and publicity was high. He was, or thought himself to be, King of the Hill. His elementary sense of humor was running still higher. He characterized me in a way that I found offensive and he then laughed. I laughed with him, but it was the end.

The end -- with the exception of one more encounter. About fifteen or so years ago, I sat with Klaus Peters, my publisher, in the lobby of the Hotel Algonquin, that place where all the literary wits of the '20's and '30's foregathered. I recognized Norm coming out of the Men's Room. Simultaneously, he recognized me. He was cordial. We shook hands. I introduced him to Klaus. Klaus stood aside a bit while a very short conversation ensued:

*NM: Are you still married to Handy ?*

*PJD : Yes. It's been many years.*

*NM : You’re lucky. I'm still looking.*