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Critics' Choice: Fall Clothes to Rave About

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Literary Heat!

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Norman Mailer

LIVES OF THE AUTHORS

The Wasp's Song

For Mailer, the Apollo moon landing stands as a triumph of "Wasputude." The Wasp mind obsesses him. "I've been trying to figure it out all my life." His first fiction for Esquire since *An American Dream* marks his latest attempt.

Norman Mailer never
publishes a word without creating
a literary event, and in the
fiction that follows, he is writing at
the height of his powers



Mailer

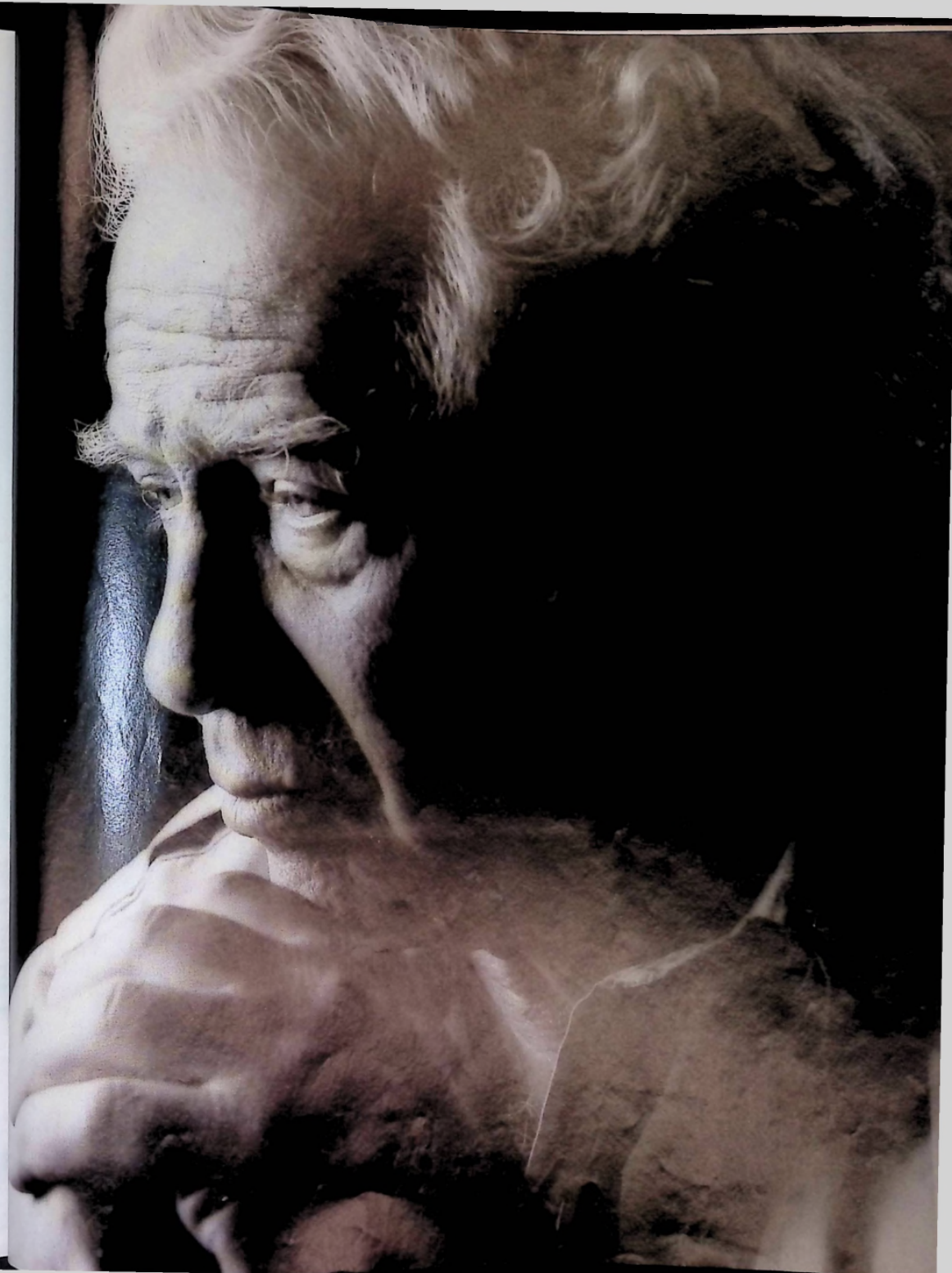
A Piece of Harlot's Ghost

In adolescence, I had only to say "God," and I would think of my groin. God was lust to me, God was very much like the image of the Devil offered to us by my good school, St. Matthew's. Chapel was daily and devoted to Christ, but once a week on average we might hear of the temptings of a somewhat legendary master-ghost named Satan. Chapel kept God and Satan well separated, but I, unlike other Matties, kept mixing them up. I had my reasons: I was introduced to carnal relations during my first year in the school by an assistant chaplain of St. Matthew's who *glommed*—I choose the word to convey the sensation of that rubbery indefatigable seal—my fourteen-year-old penis in his tight, unhappy lips.

We were in Washington, D.C., on a school trip. Maybe that is one more reason I dislike our subtle oppressive capital, that broad well-paved swamp. Boredom and bad memory are at the root of every oppression, I would suppose, and that night I

was sharing a double bed with the assistant chaplain in an inexpensive hotel not far from H Street NW, and was unable to sleep, and feeling full of apprehension when the chaplain came out of a millrace of stentorian snoring, murmured his wife's name several times, "Bettina, Bettina," and proceeded to embrace my hips and strip my bewildered young privates of their primeval dew. I remember lying there with a complete sense of the sixteen other members of my class who were also on the trip and in the hotel. I visualized them two by two, and four by four, in all the other six bedrooms where they had been placed. On this annual trip to Washington, the assistant chaplain was our guide, and since I had not succeeded in my first year at the school in being associated in anyone's mind with anyone else, and thereby was marked as a loner, the assistant chaplain, a sympathetic fellow, had assigned me to his room.

In the other cubicles, who knew what might be going on? At St. Matthew's they



used to call it "kidding around." I stayed far apart from such gang-play. All of us knew, however, that there were goings-on in comparative phallitude all up and down the dorm. Boys would stand side by side and hone themselves into erections to see who was longer. It was the age of innocence. Being wider was not even a concept to us, for it would have suggested penetration. The nearest any of the boys came to carnal insertion was by mounting a sweet fat little creature named Arnold. We called him St. Matthew's Arnold; even at the age of fourteen, literary wit was not discouraged among us. St. Matthew's Arnold used to drop his pants and lie on a bed, buttocks exposed. Six or eight of us would watch while two or three of the more athletic of our skulk would take turns slapping their brand-new instruments onto the crack between St. Matthew's Arnold's cheeks. "Ugh, you're disgusting," they'd say, and he'd whine back, "Aaah, shut up. You're doing it, too."

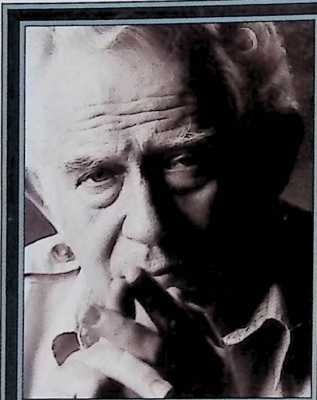
It was never in the least homosexual. It was "kidding around." Once done, it was not uncommon for the budding jock to leap off the body, wipe himself, and say, "Why can't you be a girl? You look just like a girl." Which was true—Arnold's cheeks were cousins to the moon—and Arnold, having his own male dignity to defend, would reply, "Aaah, shut up." He was smaller than the boys who did it to him, so they barely cuffed him for being rude. I would, as I say, merely watch.

My own relation to these sports and circus was revealed to me, however, by the sweet-edged shudder that the chaplain's mean little lips pulled from me. When it was over, and I had been given an adolescent's peek into the firmament, he swallowed all the nourishment offered the parching of his mouth and began to sob in shame. I knew he was worried about his wife and children. "Don't worry," I said. "I'll never tell." He hugged me. Gently, I disengaged myself. I did it gently out of no noble funds of generosity, rather in the fear he would turn angry. I did my best to picture him officiating at a high mass in school chapel, white silk surplice over white linen cassock, those ritual gestures a talisman I could employ against him. It may have been a real magic. After an interval of silence, equal in weight to the darkness of our hotel room, he gave a sigh, slipped out of bed, and spent the rest of the night on the floor, while I lay awake on the razor's edge of dreams I could never quite enter.

That was the extent of my homosexual

experience, but what a bend it put into the shape of my psyche. I stayed away from sex as though it were a disease. I had bog-and-marsh dreams in which I was Arnold and the chaplain released streams of the foulest suppurations over me. In turn, I would awaken to feel infected. My sheets were wet, sprayed with nothing less than the pus, I was certain, of my unholy infections.

When Hugh Tremont Montague came up one weekend with my father in a chartered light plane from Boston, to stay with us at our summer home on Mount Desert Island,



it was an event of the first measure. We had a much-spoken-of visitor. I might have heard of my anointed godfather for the first time during a lunch with my father at '21,' but his name seemed present everywhere thereafter, at least at school. A new file in my personal history had been duly opened. He was, as I now discovered, one of the half-dozen legends at St. Matthew's. All through my first year at school, I know that teachers must have spoken of him, but—being a stubborn adolescent—the name never entered my ear. Once my father inscribed his importance on my heart, however, there seemed accounts of him everywhere. It is possible that Hugh Montague grew larger at St. Matthew's after he left—we spoke of him now as if he had been a headmaster. By actual record, he had been coach of the soccer team and founder of the Mountaineering Club. A graduate of St. Matthew's, '32, and of Harvard, '36, he had come back to the school and taught English and Divine Studies—he

installed his own dicta in our dogma and lore. At St. Matthew's, I had heard of the Egyptian goddess Maat before I ever heard of Hugh Montague. The invocation of her name, however, was due to him. Maat had the body of a woman and a large feather for her neck and head. As the Egyptian Goddess of Truth, she embodied a curious holy principle: in the depths of one's soul, the difference between a truth and a falsehood weighed no more than a feather. St. Matthew's tended to equate this weight to the presence of Christ, and Montague was the determined author of that addition. St.

LIVES OF THE AUTHORS

Author, Auteur

Over the course of a restless career, he has made regular excursions into the movies. Acting. Scripting. Spent the winters before last on Cape Cod directing the film of his novel *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. "Movie logic is when things are spooky, nasty." The reimmersion into fiction is "just coming home to your wife after a year's absence. The greeting is not awkward."

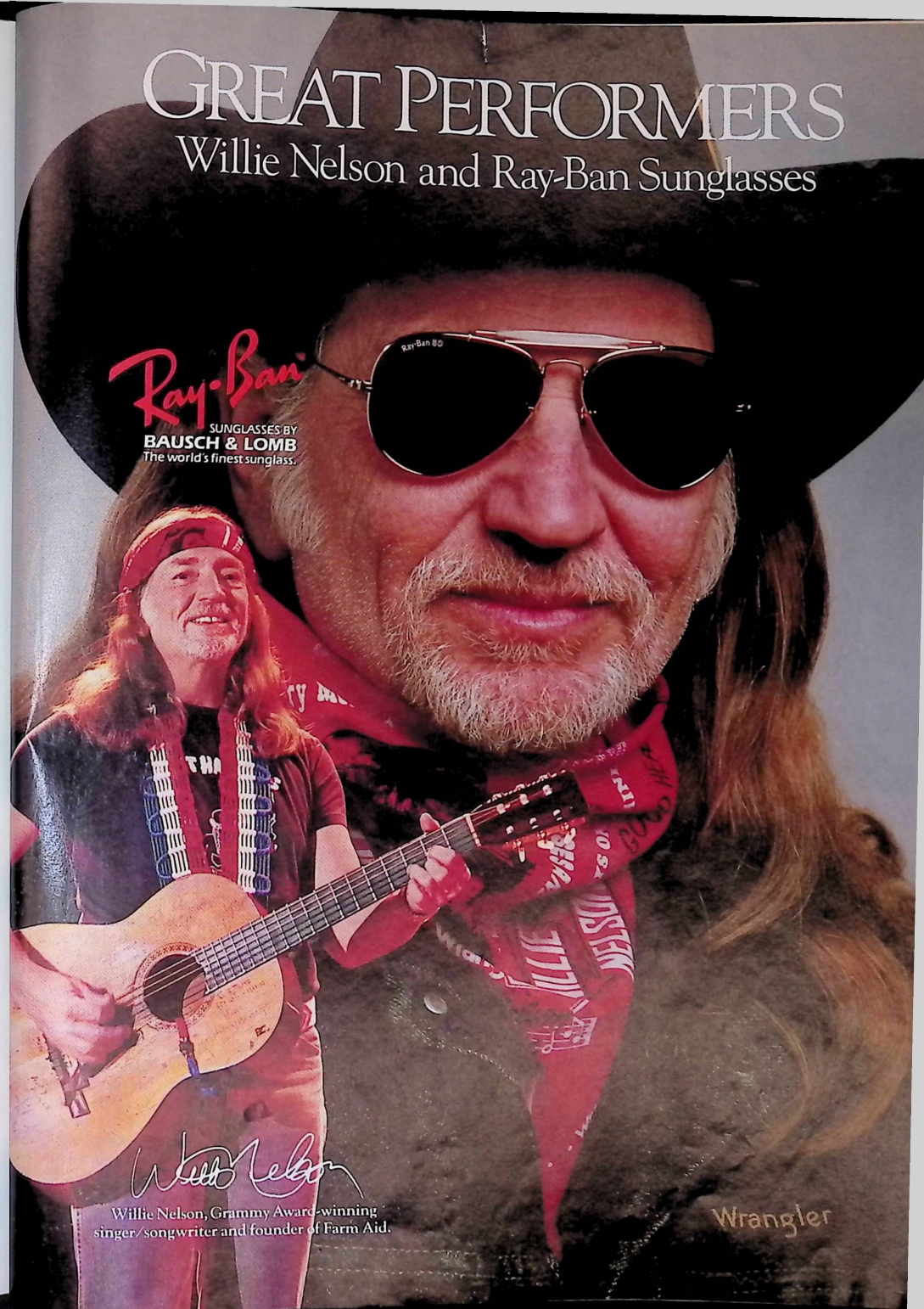
Matthew's had always taken Divine Studies seriously, but after Montague's influence on us, we had a contribution to make—so we felt—greater than any other school of our ilk in New Hampshire or Massachusetts, or—if one is to slum it—down in Connecticut. We were closer to God than the others, although we knew enough not to state the fact. Hugh—known then as Mr. Montague—had given the clue: Christ was Love, but Love lived only in the Truth.

That is an extraordinary addition to the Beatitudes if we come to recognize—as I have—that Christ has a special tenderness for drunks and liars. Christ, however, was Truth to Mr. Montague, and on the consequence, one's ability to recognize the presence of Grace (which I always saw as a leavening in the region of the chest) could be injured by a lie.

Montague left precepts at St. Matthew's. God the Father—awesome, monumental Jehovah—was the principle of Justice. All

GREAT PERFORMERS

Willie Nelson and Ray-Ban Sunglasses



Willie Nelson, Grammy Award-winning singer/songwriter and founder of Farm Aid.

Wrangler

agreed that God, the Father, was Justice. Mr. Montague added that God, the Father, was also the embodiment of Courage. Just as Love was Truth and there could be no compassion without honesty, so was Justice equal to Courage. There was no justice for the coward. There was only the purgatory of his daily life. Did a student feel despair? Look to the root. A cowardly act had been committed or a lie told. Somewhere in the literature from the school sent out to increase St. Matt's endowment are a few lines quoted from an address Hugh Montague gave on a special occasion to a senior class

Competition on the playing field became, therefore, an avatar of Courage and Prudence, Love and Truth. On the playing field, one could find the unique proportions in each boy's heart. Later, properly prepared, one might be able to deal with the Devil out in the world. Although never suggested at St. Matthew's, we all knew that women—as opposed to mothers, sisters, cousins, and ladies—had to be one more word for the world.

Since Mr. Montague had been gone for six years before I entered, my enlarged awareness of his historical presence at St.

forehead. One talked to him with no sense of ease: I knew immediately why Christ was Truth, not Love, for Mr. Montague. "Heaven help me," was my first thought as we shook hands—he had a grip to remind you of the hard rubber pads that are put on vise-jaws to keep them from injuring any vulnerable object in their grasp. "Heaven help me," went my thought, "this man is a real prick."

I remember how my father, forty pounds heavier than Hugh Tremont Montague, circled nonetheless around our introduction like an anxious relative, a facet of my father's personality I had never seen before. I not only realized how much this meeting had to mean to my father, but even why it had taken so long to arrange—his expectations would suffer a dull bruise if it did not work. I remember that my father circled Mr. Montague and me, and my father was soon gone. I have some recollection that we then went down to the den to have a talk. That comes to me with clarity.

"You're out of the dyslexia, your father says."

"I think so."

"That's good. What are your subjects at St. Matthew's?"

I named them.

"Your favorite?"

"English," I said.

"What's the best novel you've read this year?"

"Portrait of a Lady," I said. "We had it assigned, but I liked it a lot."

He nodded sourly. "Henry James is a quince pie as large as the Mojave Desert. It's a pity. Put Hemingway's heart in him, and there would have been a writer to equal Stendhal or Tolstoy."

"Yessir," I said. I was thinking that I was a liar. I had gotten an A for my paper on *Portrait of a Lady*, but I had merely parroted a few critical appreciations. I certainly hadn't gone to bed happily with Henry James. *The Young Lions* was what I had enjoyed most last year. Noah Ackerman, the Jew, had appealed to me.

"Let's go out tomorrow," he said. "Your father wants me to take you on a climb. I hear there's dependable rock suitable for beginners over at a place called Otter Cliffs. We'll pick a route that's feasible."

"Yessir." I was hoping that what he called Otter Cliffs was some other Otter Cliffs than the one I knew. For the one I knew was black rock and dropped a straight eighty feet down to the sea. Sometimes on the rise of the tide, there was a

heavy roll of surf in Frenchman Bay, and I had heard the growl of black waters on black rock at Otter Cliffs. Indeed, the fall was so steep I could never look over the edge.

"Guess I've never done any rock-climbing," I said, and regretted the remark on the instant.

"You'll know a little more tomorrow than you know right now."

"Yessir."

"Your father asked me to be your godfather."

I nodded. My quick fear at the thought

"Never," I said. "But I'm going to try."

"Harry," he said, giving me back my name for the first time; "you're fortunate to be carrying an impressive burden. I don't tell people this often, but since we are obviously embarked on a special venture, at least personally speaking, I choose to inform you that a father one admires extravagantly is less of an impost in life than the curious business of growing up without one. Mine was killed in Colorado in a shooting accident."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I was eleven when it occurred. I must say I didn't have to grow up altogether without him. He was always a presence in my life."

It took twenty-five years before I was to learn that David Montague, his father, had been shot by his mother, Imogene, as David entered the master bedroom one night. It was never clear whether he had lost his keys and was climbing through the window or coming through the door. There was too much blood on the floor. Either he had traveled, mortally wounded, on his belly from the window to the door, as was her claim, or had been dragged by Hugh's mother from the door to the window, then back to the door, to support the story that his unexpected entrance by the window caused her to believe he was an intruder. I understand Ty Cobb's father was shot under similar circumstances, and there are some who believe it accounts for the tigerish rapacity of Ty Cobb on the base paths. If that is the formula for the making of unholy determination, I see no reason why it could not apply to Hugh Montague.

Next day, true to his promise, he drove me out to Otter Cliffs. In anticipation, I spent a sleepless night. First I had hoped it would rain, then I began to hope it would not. I was certain that Mr. Montague would say the essence of rock-climbing was to accept the given. If the rock was slippery in the rain, we would still have to go. So I began to pray it would not rain.

It was misty at 6:30 in the morning, but I knew the weather in Mount Desert well enough to see that the sky would be clear by 8:00. To avoid a family breakfast, we had fried eggs and coffee at a hash house (no granola for outdoorsmen then!), and I ate my food in all somber duty, the yolk and biscuits going down like sulphur and brimstone. Then we took the Park Drive along the eastern shore of Mount Desert, and as we drove I named for him all the places long familiar to me, the Beehive, Sand Beach, Thunder Hole, Gorham

Mountain, a guide leading the way to his own terminal hour. Or, so I was convinced. Rock-climbing was familiar to me, if only in sleep. I always knew when a dream had become a nightmare, for there was I clinging to a ledge.

We parked. We walked along a wooded trail for a hundred yards, debouched on a ledge, and had, all to ourselves, at the precipice of a cliff, a view open to the boom and hiss of the Atlantic pounding on rocks below. I took a quick glimpse down. It proved no easier than standing on the edge of a roof without a railing seven stories high. My impulse was to say, "Mr. Montague, are you certain this is the right place?"

He was scouting, his boots six inches from the lip. He strode along, frowning and clucking, weighing the contingencies of one ascent against another while I sat next to his climbing gear, nerveless, and for all I knew, limbless. The stone on which I sat was pale pink and friendly, but the straight rockfall below was dark gray, close to black at the bottom. Years later, in "The Department Store" in Saigon, I was to have an outrageous attack of anxiety one night as I stared at a Vietnamese prostitute's outspread legs. Her open vagina looked like a sinister orchid until I realized that the contrast of her pink petals and near-black overleaves had brought me back to the fearful minutes I waited while Mr. Montague took the measure of where to commence my instruction.

Finally, he settled on the right place. "This will do," he said, and unstrapped his gear, took out two coiled nylon ropes from the tote bag, and tugged on a few trees near the edge. "We'll rappel down," he said. "It's easy. Beginners like it. I, however, confess to you—it terrifies me."

Somehow that was reassuring. "Why?" I managed to ask.

"You're dependent on things external to yourself," he answered, as if that were the only reply. "There's no sure way to tell when a little tree like this can give."

He was taking precautions. I will not try to describe all that he did, but I could understand that he was not only anchoring one end of the rappel rope to the tree, but connecting it to other anchors by means of long slings of webbing slipped over some adjacent rocks. All of it converged through an oval chromium ring smaller than my palm, which I knew was called a carabiner.

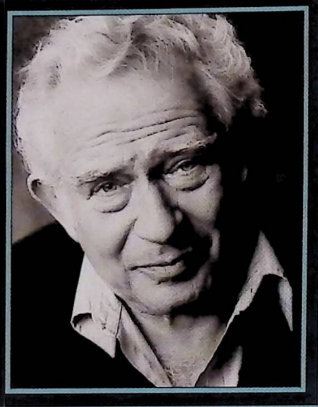
"Are you going to use pitons?" I asked, trying my best to give him a warrant of knowledgeability.

"Oh, no need," he said. "Not for this."

LIVES OF THE AUTHORS

Mailer the Engineer

As a boy, he built the most admired, intricate model airplanes in his Brooklyn neighborhood. Family decided he should design real ones. Studied aeronautical engineering at Harvard in the Forties. When he directs movies, he's an "aesthetic engineer." When he writes fiction, he's a physicist. "A physicist can do it all in his head. An engineer has to move things around."



in chapel. "The purpose of this school," he said, "is not to send you away as brilliant men—although some of you do indeed bear the unruly gift of quick mentality—but to offer American society our graduates known for their honesty and sense of purpose. It is this school's intention that you will leave us as good, brave young men."

I will say it for Mr. Montague and St. Matthew's. Our theology was more complex than that. There was the special temptation of evil for the good and brave. The Devil, Montague warned, employed his finest wits to trap the noblest soldiers. Vanity, complacency, and indolence were therefore a curse. Bravery was an ascending slope and one could not rest on it. One must succeed in rising to every challenge except the ones that would destroy us needlessly. So, prudence became the sole amelioration God allowed to the imperative of Courage, even as Love offered, on occasion, a tender presence to Truth.

Matthew's gave me no sense of the dialectical niceties of his mind. Only the precepts came down to us, strong doses of theology imparted by instructors who lived with the conclusions rather than the love of logical consequence that had brought him there. So, hypocrisy abounded also at St. Matthew's. We were all smaller than our precepts. Indeed, the assistant chaplain who minted my adolescent glans with his pursed lips was, of course, a disciple of Hugh Tremont Montague, even a rock-climber, although I heard he was not a good one.

Rock-climbing, after all, was the objective correlative of Virtue, which is to say, the meeting of Truth and Courage. I was soon to find out. That night, in the summer of 1949 when Hugh Montague came to our house for the first time, he was thirty-five and I was seventeen. He looked forty-five to me, and much as I expected, half a British officer, for his erect posture and his moustache, half an Anglican clergyman, by his wire-rimmed eyeglasses and high

LIVES OF THE AUTHORS

Mailer on the Rocks

A student of the metaphysics of fear. Dives deep into the danger zones of his psyche to map the contours of dread, riding the occasional public humiliation. In his fifties, he went rock-climbing at Otter Cliffs in Maine and the Shawangunks of New York. "The fear is enormous. But it's a primal fear. You feel cleansed by it."

of tomorrow had already commandeered the lower register of my voice. If I said *yessir* one more time, it would come out like ship's pipes.

"I have to tell you," he said, "I was inclined to refuse." He fixed me front and center with his stare. "One must have a close personal interest to be a godfather."

"That's true, I suppose." I croaked it forth.

"I don't like close personal interest."

I nodded.

"On the other hand, I have regard for your father. No one will ever know how good his war record was until the secrets can be told."

"Yessir." But I beamed. Absolutely unexpected to myself, I felt such happiness at this statement of my father's qualities that I knew the value, on the spot, of family pride. I was filled from head to toe with all the nourishment of my blood.

"Given pride like that in your father," he said, "you will be able to equal him."

I realized that, old as he was, we were acting as if both of us were seventeen. Which made it worse. He was vastly superior.

"All right, you wait here," he said when done, "and I'll go down, look it over, and come back. Then you'll do it."

I found it hard to believe that he was going to make a voyage up and down that cliff as casually as taking reconnaissance of a few floors on an elevator, but indeed, he gave one mighty yank on the anchor of his rappelling rope, and satisfied with such security, stood on the edge of the cliff, back to the sea, the rope wound once around his waist, and stated, "You'll find this the hardest part of the rappel. Just slack off some rope and consign your butt to the void. Then, sit back on the rope." Which he did by placing the soles of his shoes on the lip and leaning backward, until his extended legs were in a horizontal line with the ground. "Now," he said, "just walk down step by step. Keep your legs stiff, your feet against the rock, and give yourself a little slack when you need it."

He made a few moves slowly, simulating the step-by-step technique a beginner should employ, the performance going on for five or six steps of descent. After which, bored with the sluggishness of this method, and displeased, doubtless, with the way I hugged the ledge of the cliff in order to look over, he gave a little whoop, shoved away with his legs to swing out from the rock, and must have slacked ten feet of rope off in a rush, for when he bounced toes first back into the wall, he was a good piece farther down already, and with three or four more such springs in and out from the rock, there he was at the bottom, standing on another ledge of flat, black, wet stone.

He slipped the rope from around his waist, called to me to pull it up. Then he climbed up right after. It seemed to take him no longer than he would have spent on five or six flights of stairs.

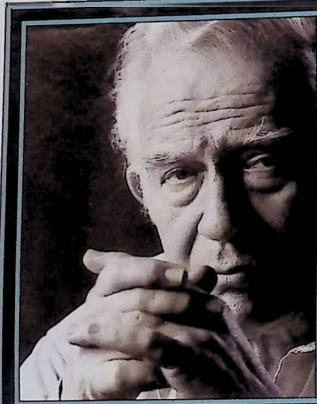
"Nice rock," he said. "You'll have a good time."

I did not say a word. I thought of every excuse I could make. I had had no sleep. I felt dizzy at unexpected times. I thought I might be developing heart trouble. I would like to approach this more slowly: Could we warm up on one of the trails that did not require ropes? Down below, tolling loudly on the rocks, the surf reverberated among my fears with the overpowering echoes of a bell tower.

I said nothing. I realized that my own destruction was by now superior to whimper-

ing out of this situation with Mr. Montague. Since I could find no excuse that would survive, I stood passively as a martyr before fagots and flames, but I was only a numb body suffering the rope to be fastened about me. Later, there would be much sophistication of apparatus, but on this occasion he merely knotted the rope around my waist, a rope whose other end he would hold, then took the second rope, slipped it through the carabiner attached to the tree, and pulled it half through so that it could be gripped as twin ropes. That double rope would be my rappel. He passed it

an eye socket; each large crack, a door ajar. Faces of intricate benignity and malevolence looked back at me from the lines and knobs of the rock. I felt as if I were lowering myself around the flank of Leviathan. Yet such was my relief at being able to perform these acts that before I reached the bottom, I actually gave a few thrusts out with my legs and tried running off slack with the move through the double carabiners at my waist, these tentative efforts not dissimilar, I am certain, to the first stir of the lower throat that a six-week-old dog will make in preparation for barking.



LIVES OF THE AUTHORS

The Dwindling Soul

He hates plastic, popping flashbulbs, the vapid technology of our times. The cameras reduced Jackie Onassis to a glittering husk of herself, he believes. Years they've vaporized a portion of his own soul. "I do believe I have less soul because I've been photographed so many times that I try to overcome the limits imposed by that."

through two carabiners linked onto my harness at the waist, the carabiners to serve as brake during the rappel, then took the double rope under my thigh, diagonally across my chest, and around my back to my other arm. So, holding each end of its snakelike embrace of me, one hand guiding the slack, the other arm out for balance, I started to walk backward over the lip.

To put one's heels on a ledge and lean backward into space, holding only to a rope, is equal to the wail one hears in childhood on falling out of bed. One discovers that the voice is one's own. My first few steps, feet pressed flat against the vertical rock, were as clumsy as if my legs were concrete posts.

It was only after I descended five or six steps that I began to comprehend rappelling could actually be done; indeed, it was a good deal easier to learn than employment of crutches.

How intimate was the surface of the rock, however! Each pock before me was

I reached the ledge. The surf was steaming just below, and the wet black stone under my sneakers felt as oily as a garage floor. I released the double rappel rope from the double carabiner and only then realized I had been attached all the while to the other end that Mr. Montague held. If all had gone wrong, and I had lost balance on my rappel, Mr. Montague would have been there to support me by the second connection. Now my initial fear felt absurd to me. I was commencing to learn that fear was a ladder whose rungs are surmounted one by one, and at the summit—as Mr. Montague would probably say—lay Judgment itself.

He now plummeted down in three long swoops to stand beside me on the wet ledge. "This climb will test you," he said. "However, it's not unreasonable. Just a matter of learning a new vocabulary."

"What do you mean?" I murmured. I had my first good look at the ascent he was suggesting I make, and fear returned to coil around my lungs. I was back to the first

step in the mastery of oneself.

He gave the smallest smile—the first one I had seen him offer since his arrival. "You'll find I picked a climb with loads of buckets."

Unattached to any rope, he started up. "Try to recall my route when you're here," he called down from fifteen feet above, "but don't fret if you lose it. Part of the fun is to come on your own finds." Whereupon he mounted the face in one continuous series of easy moves and was at the top before I became aware again that the rope attached to my waist was still very much in place, and its other end was tied to some tree above the lip and out of sight. Mr. Montague appeared on the edge, some eighty agonizing feet above, sitting on the brink in all comfort, his feet dangling over, my rope, the rope, that is, with which he would belay me, wound casually and only once around his waist.

"Won't I pull you with me if I fall?" I asked. My voice emerged in a reasonably clear little croak, but the effort was analogous to hurling the shot put.

"I'm anchored to the tree." He beamed down on me. "Get started. I'll send you clues by carrier pigeon." I was beginning to understand what animated him. The air of funk in others can taste, I suppose, like caviar.

How to speak of the beauty that rises from one's fear of the rock? I was petrified, I was shriven, I understood the logic of God: the seed of compassion is to be found in the harsh husk of the demand.

When I started up the wall, I could not believe how straight up was its ascent. I thought there might be some slant in my favor, but no, the rock was vertical. True, it was cracked and scarred and nubbled and pitted, a raw, rough acne of surface that you could certainly get a grip on. Feeling a friendly knob of a hold at the top of my reach, and seeing a small slot for my foot, I stepped in, reached up, pulled, and was now a foot off the ground. I knew the emotions of the first great day at Kitty Hawk.

To fortify me, I felt the rope pull on hips and waist. "If you need a little help," he yelled down, "call for 'Tension,'" on which, by demonstration, he pulled harder so that I felt somewhat less than my own full weight and more inclined to climb. I found another grip and foothold just above, took the move, took another, and another, then glanced down. I was eight feet above the ledge, how splendid! I found another knob and above my knee one of the buckets of which he spoke, a hole about as

large as a pool table pocket into which I could shove my foot. There I rested, trying to catch my breath. The rock felt alive to me. It had odors, and grooves filled with dirt, overhanging elbows, armpits; it had pubic corners. I do not wish to exaggerate, but the intimacy of the activity had me unprepared. It was as if I were climbing up the body of a giant made of bones and flesh and pieces and parts of a thousand humans, and the more I encountered trouble on the climb, the more this was true. Then I entered the more difficult portion of the ascent and was trapped about halfway up in one place where I lost all sense of how to continue. I had come to a spot where there were no good grips to reach with my hands, and not a quarter inch of rock-wrinkle to support the next push with my foot. Straddled in deadlock, I encountered the agonizing indecision of the rock-climber. All the while that one's limbs are burning from frantic expenditures of anxiety, one does not know whether to try to continue up, or look to descend a few feet in order to veer onto another route. Frozen on the rock, my voice scorched in my throat, and the open depths below falling away into the unrecoverable past, I now stared like a pawnbroker with his loupe at presumptive jewels of possibility presented by each ripple in the rock. I think half of all I ever learned about rock-climbing must have been absorbed in the first five minutes on Otter Cliffs. I had been introduced to the great social world of vertical stone. There, the smallest bit of irregularity can prove an immensely useful friend, a treacherous if conceivably employable associate, a closed door, or an outright enemy. I had managed to maneuver myself into a coffin's corner just below a small overhang.

There I rested, sobbing for breath, altogether bewildered by what to do next. The more I squeezed myself into this perch, which accommodated only a part of my body, the more I had to consume the strength of my arms in unhappy holds. I heard Montague call out, "Don't build your nest there. It's no place to breed."

"I don't know what to do," I said. "Back down a few feet. Work over to your right."

It was then I discovered the curious nature of one's own virtue. That is usually so inaccessible to us that we are doomed to know less of our virtue than our separate vices. Even as I began to obey him and took my first step of retreat, eyeing already all the latent possibilities he had suggested to the right, I saw there might be a quicker

way around the overhang if I tried a route to the left. It was riskier. One can never see all the crucial details that lie above (which is why even the best climbers sometimes mount with great effort into a cul-de-sac). Here, to the right, I had his word at least, whereas to the left, I could see one good move and then another, but there appeared to be some straddle ten feet above, some smooth rock face with two vertical cracks five feet apart—and perhaps a hold or two, I could not tell. What appears to be a hold from below can prove only the shadow of a bulge; what promises an edge for one's foot

turns out to be too narrow. It is no more than a striation in the stone. Speaking of God, six good inches of ledge on which a man could stand was as demonstrably good as a gift from the angels. One becomes intimate with the rock. One lives on it so long. What Montague had mounted in ninety or a hundred seconds was now screwing me into my tenth and fifteenth minute of laborious fear-fraught ascent.

Yet I took the option to the left. It was mine. It had not been given to me by him and so it might be my virtue. Such was the state of my logic. Panting for breath as unashamedly as a woman in labor, at least by my adolescent, film-sophisticated understanding of what a woman might be in labor, nonetheless my religious education advanced by leaps. Virtue was grace. The impossible could be traversed by the intuitions of one's heart. Scaling off to the left, I had to make moves I would not have attempted before. Desperate to prove my choice, I had to include one fancy scrabble

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LIVES OF THE AUTHORS

Hizzoner, the Mailer

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from one welt of rock up to another, neither step of which could have held me for more than a second, but I did it all in one continuous move as if I were Montague, and in reward found myself able to stand and rest on the small ledge above the overhang.

Montague called down, "Three cheers, boy. You're past the crux."

It came upon me. I had gotten through the worst. I continued on to the top in a state of elation that was potentially as dangerous as an all-out funk. "Perfect," he said when I joined him. "Now we'll try you on

Once, he took along two of my cousins, but we had a dull morning on my first old route, and I took no pleasure in their fears. I felt—rare emotion—like a veteran.

Mr. Montague and I preferred to be alone. Each day he took me over a different kind of hazard. I was introduced to finger jams and pressure holds. I learned how to "smear" smooth rock with the heel of my hand. Lie-back holds and crack-backs were shown to me, foot jams and chimneys. He took me up squeeze chimneys and over slabs, gave me problems in mantling and hand traverses. Forgive me, but I mention

washed in sweat. I spent time with fear as intimately as a sufferer with flu knows fever. I learned the terrible law of fear. It had to be conquered or it collected together, then invaded one's dreams. There were days when I could not complete a climb and had to go down. In rock-climbing, it is harder, however, to descend than to climb—one's feet have to search for the holds, and they see less well than the fingers. So, I slipped often, and dangled on the rope, and sweated, and knew myself doubly abject, and could not sleep that night for confronting my terror: I would have to go back the next day and do it again.

There is no psychological transaction more compelling. I think one is raising at such times all the ships lost in childhood from loss of courage, yes, hoisting them up from the sea bottom of oneself. I felt as if all the great fears that weighed me down had begun their ascent to the surface—I was being delivered from the graveyard of lost hope. But what a chancy operation it was! Each time I failed to complete a climb, the fear I was hoping to free was not consumed but turned corrupt, and I was left wholly rotten within.

Yet each time I succeeded where I had failed the day before, I received my dependable reward. For an hour, or for a night, I was happy. On the best day I had in those two weeks, which was the last day, Montague brought me back to Otter Cliffs and told me to take the lead. Notwithstanding all I had learned, going up first on the same ascent where I had begun proved several times more difficult. Taking the lead, I had to hammer in my pitons as I went, my arm in such a catalepsy of controlled panic it would cramp after every few raps of the hammer. Now the prospect of a fall was serious again. On the lead, I tried to put a piton in every five feet, knowing each prospective fall might double the length, since I could plummet from five feet above the last piton to five feet below. That ten feet would be doubled if the lower piton should pull out. With such a prospect, an easy climb becomes a hard climb.

Once I did fall. It was for ten feet, no more, my piton held, but I bounced on the end of the rope, then took a mean swing into the rock. Scraped, bruised, and feeling as shattered as a cat who has been dropped into a pail of ice water, I held my breath against the long temptation to whimper, took a full minute to call back the wide-flying streamers of my exploded will, and, hard to believe that I was exacting this on myself, took up the climb again and looked



LIVES OF THE AUTHORS

The Art of Virtue

At age sixty-five, he has taken up the monk's life, closeted away in his Brooklyn townhouse working steadily on his next novel. The regimen of writing he finds arduous, physically punishing. "It gets harder the older you get. This novel is making me live virtuously." He's practically a vegetarian these days. "I can't eat meat when I write, or I get gout immediately."

tougher stuff." He began packing the gear for the drive to a superior nightmare.

One's fears on the rock soon gain proportion. If one does not take the lead like Montague, and is belayed from above by a good climber, it soon becomes clear that one can afford on occasion to fall. Unaware, my first time up, of such relative security, I made every move as if a mistake might be my death. It took a second ascent that afternoon on a vertical column in The Precipices to make me aware that I was living in comparative safety. For one move I made did not work; I slipped from a fractional foothold. Yet I only plunged a couple of feet and suffered no more than a scrape to my knee. The rope held by him was belaying me from above.

I made progress after that. Mr. Montague had accepted my father's invitation to take his two weeks' summer vacation at our home. So, for two weeks, I went out every day with him. (And often in the rain.)

these techniques to keep track of the different rock faces on which we spent our days. There were nights when the proper placement of pitons and bongs clanged in my head as I went to sleep, and I heard the hiss of the rope as Mr. Montague, on the lead, tugged it through the carabiner above me.

I had fallen in love with the illimitable skill of the rock-climber. Clumsy, using my arms more than my legs, and my will as a substitute for wisdom, I scratched my way up many a face, filthy with the effluvia of the stone. For those two weeks of summer, I did not have a finger, an elbow, or a knee that was not raw, and my thighs and shins acquired a hundred bruises, but I was happy. I expect I was more happy than not for the first time in my life, and thereby, at the age of seventeen, grasped a truth some never touch: happiness is experienced most directly in the intervals between terror. As each climb he led me to was, in general, more difficult than the one before, so did I rarely have a day in which I was not

for a way through the crux. It happened to be the same overhang as on the first day, but now I was dragging a rope behind me, rather than being encouraged from above. Two weeks of quickly acquired knowledge made the difference. I worked my way to the lip without another fall.

Those two weeks did much for me. I had new standing in the family. My cousins gave way to my opinions in passing squabbles, and my father took me out for a night of drinking in the modest bars of Bar Harbor. Toward the end of the evening, I was feeling as relaxed as a piece of spaghetti

tous connection with bourbon the night before, as well as the great (if secret) release of knowing Mr. Montague, fearsome godfather, would be gone tomorrow, had me nattering. I was set to take vows never to forswear the new discipline, but Mr. Montague cut me off.

"Harry, I'm going to tell you something that will hurt. I mean it, however, not only for your good, but the world's. I have kept a high opinion of you over these two weeks. You are going to make a good man, and I respect that doubly in your case because you were dealt paltry cards in childhood. I gather your mother is tiny."

"Yes."

"And not wholly dependable, according to your father."

"Not wholly."

"Men work to develop their evil skills. Women—it is my belief—merely summon them." When he saw my adolescent eyes were not within a hundred miles of the summit of this observation, he shrugged, and said, "When we know each other a little better, we might trade a few anecdotes about our respective mothers"—he came to a full stop as if startled by himself—"although, don't count on it."

"Yessir."

"From now on, when we're alone, you and I, I want you to call me by the name a few of my associates know. I have my reasons for telling you now. The name is Harlot. Not to be confused with Harlow, Jean Harlow, but Harlot."

"Yessir."

"One of the most persistent little questions over at Foggy Bottom is why Montague has kept that damn name since the OSS. Sooner or later, they all make the pilgrimage over to my good side and have the touching simplicity to ask directly. As if I were about to tell! Should we become exceptional friends, I'll spill the beans. In twenty years."

"Yes, Harlot." I stopped. "It doesn't sound right."

"Never fear. You'll get used to it." He picked up the knuckles of a claw, twisted them apart without getting his fingertips caught on the spurs, and proceeded with his lobster fork to pluck forth the meat.

"Harry, I'll present you with the worst first." He fixed me with his eyes. There would be no sliding off. "I want you to give up rock-climbing."

He could have struck me in the face.

"Oh," I said. "Golly."

"It's not that you are bad. You are better than your physical skills. You have innate

moxie. Of ten beginners one might instruct, I say you would probably come in second or third from the best."

"Then why do I have to stop?" I paused. I dropped my voice. "Would I kill myself?" "No. Probably not. Hurt yourself certainly. But that's not my reason. It's more particular than that. Only the best of beginners should ever dream of going on. It's more than just a sport, you see, for brave ones like yourself." This was the first time anyone had ever called me brave.

"No," I said. "Why? Why do you want me to quit?"

"It's an activity that insists on excellence. Harry, if you went on, it would take your life over. You could not rest with the fear. Whenever you failed on a climb, the memory would overpower every thought until you succeeded. Even among good people, that can be a terribly corrupting process. An addiction. One ends as a coward, a victim, or a mediocre monomaniac whose defeats always equal his successes. It is like being an ex-alcoholic. One is able to contemplate nothing else."

I was sufficiently agitated to say to him: "I don't understand what you're saying." My voice must have been rude-edged for I could feel his annoyance. His discipline as a pedagogue may have saved me from a few thrusts of his temper.

"All right, then," he said, "we will go further. A man who acquires high competence in rock-climbing is able to become the instrument of his own will. That's what we try to arrive at. That's what we're encouraged to desire from the year one. A child is taught not to soil his pants. Think of that. His bowels become the instrument of his will. And as we grow older, we often feel emotions that are as low and obstreperous as the embarrassing necessity, if caught in public, to take a drop." He used the word as though that were the only acceptable synonym ever to employ. "Nonetheless, we say to our good sphincter, so much the creature of our will, 'Tighten up, you fool.'"

"Obviously, for emotions that are Satanically inspired, it's going to take more. Rock-climbing, one learns, firms the upper regions of the will. But it's quite a process. Probably as dangerous as black magic. For in life, every fear we are ready to confront is equally open to the Devil. If we fail, the Devil leaps through the gap and soothes our cowardice. 'Stick with me,' says the Devil, 'and your cowardice shall be forgiven.' Rock-climbing, when successful, closes such a gap. It pinches the Devil off. On the other hand, should it fail, it brings the Devil

LIVES OF THE AUTHORS

Ex-Prisoner of Sex

He and former wife Adele kept a one-person orgone box in 1959. Believed he could have brought out the best in Marilyn Monroe. Arthur Miller refused to introduce them. Tangled with Germaine Greer in famous Prisoner of Sex debate in 1971. Tongue-tied upon meeting wife Norris Church. Has decried masturbation and contraception.

cooked in wine, and my male parent, giving as usual no more sign of drink than his massive emanations of good or bad will, said—he was obviously in splendid spirit—"Hugh Montague has a good opinion of you. That's the accolade, Harry. He doesn't have three words to say for any ten people."

"Well, I'm glad," I said. I felt so corny I was ready to cry. Instead, I laid in a good swallow of bourbon. The flush it inspired told me for the first time how rich my father's insides must feel.

"Hugh's going to take you for a lobster dinner tomorrow," he told me. "Hugh says that you're worth a goodbye party all to yourself."

In the event, Hugh Montague had a great deal to say to me. By the first drink, I had begun to babble—the intoxication of having learned this new sport that was a skill, an art, and an open-air monastery for the soul, augmented by my successful lead that afternoon, not to mention my felici-

back twofold. One cannot live for too long with courage and cowardice forever alternating. If one is not good enough at rock-climbing, one spends half one's time getting the Devil out, the other half allowing him back in. That is what I call marking time. So long as we stay in place, we satisfy the Devil altogether. For he loves circular, obsessive, meaningless activity. Entropy is his meat. When all the world is nothing but a pendulum, Satan will inhabit the throne."

"Maybe," I said, "I would know what I could climb and what I couldn't, and just stick with that."

"Never. You are half your father. That half is not going to rest. From the first day I could see that by one measure you were equal to the best rock-climbers. You understood it. You knew you were in an awesome church, the one where religion comes close enough to God to give a little real sustenance."

"Yessir."

"You bet. Hear me out. There's a story I was told about some farfetched, terribly intense sect of Jewish people called Hasidim. They used to inhabit some of the more southern village ghettos in Russia and the Ukraine. It seems that one of their folk, a rabbi, was so devotional that he prayed to God forty times a day, and, finally, after forty years, grew impatient and said, 'God, I have loved You for so long, why won't You reveal Yourself to me?' Whereupon, God did just that, revealed Himself. What do you think the rabbi did next?"

"I don't know."

Mr. Montague began to laugh. I had never heard him give a full laugh before. There were more people than one would have thought inside him. His laugh was all over the place. "Well, Harry, the good rabbi dived right under the bed and began to howl like a dog. 'Oh, God,' he said, 'please do not reveal Yourself to me.' That, Harry, is a useful story. God is awesome before all else. It's the first thing to know. If Christ had not been sent to us, no one would ever have gotten out of the cave. There would have been no modern civilization."

"What about Egypt, or Greece, and Rome?"

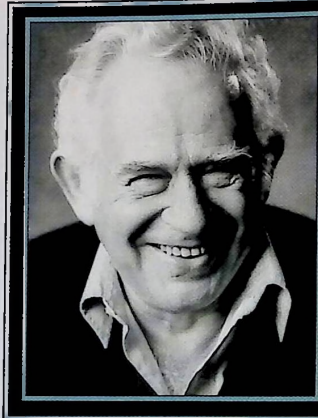
He couldn't have been more pleased with the question. "I'm glad you brought that up," he said, much as Richard Nixon would in years to come. "Harry, those cultures marked time. They were a perfect example of the obsessional. They kept time in place. Devil's abodes, all three of them. Don't be impressed by how beautiful they were. The Devil, never forget it, is the most

beautiful creature God ever made. But spiritually, these cultures never came out of the cave. They decorated the interior until it was Plato's cave, but they weren't able to stir. It took Christ to come along and say, 'Forgive the sons for the sins of the fathers.' That's the day, Harry, that scientific inquiry was born. Even if we had to wait all those centuries for Kepler and Galileo. But follow the logic: once the father begins to believe that his sons will not suffer for his acts of sacrilege, he grows bold enough to experiment. He looks upon the universe as a curious place, rather than guaranteed to

You experience God when you're extended a long way out beyond yourself and still trying to lift up from your fears. Get caught on a rock and of course you want to howl like a dog. Surmount that terror and you rise to a higher fear. That may be our simple purpose on earth. To rise to higher and higher levels of fear. If we succeed, we can, perhaps, share some of God's fear."

"His fear?"

"Absolutely. His fear of the great power He has given the Devil. There is no free will for man unless the Devil's powers are equal on this embattled planet to the Lord's. That



LIVES OF THE AUTHORS

American Ego

Ego. Mailer's word of the twentieth century. Cited Muhammad Ali as America's Greatest Ego. Mailer's own ambition has been immense. To write the "big book" that would alter American consciousness. *Ancient Evenings*, his Egyptian saga, stands as the first part of a long-promised trilogy. "I'll get to the next when my seventies, if I ever get to them."

return doom for his curiosity. That was the beginning of the technological sleigh ride that may destroy us yet. The Jews, however, being bypassed for two thousand years, had to keep dealing with Jehovah. They didn't have Christ. So they never forgot. God is awesome. 'Oh, God, do not reveal Yourself to me. Not all at once!'"

He paused. He ordered another drink for each of us, Hennessy for himself, and Harper's, I recollect, for me. "Let us have an Old Harper's for Young Harry," he actually said to the waitress, and went right back to his disquisition on the awesome: "I suspect that God is with us in some fashion on every rock-climb. Not to save us—how I detest that tit-sucking psychology—God saves!—God at the elbow of all misbegotten mediocrities. As if all that God had to do was preserve the middling and the indifferent. No, God is not a Saint Bernard dog to rescue us at every pass. God is near us when we are rock-climbing because that is the only way to get a good glimpse of Him.

is why," he said, "I don't want you to continue rock-climbing. The brute fact is that you don't have the exquisite skills that are necessary. So you will convert all you have into a vice. You will keep finding a little courage and losing it. You could end up like one of those monumentally boring golfers who work for years to improve their swing and never stop talking about it. Orotund blobs of narcissism."

"Okay," I said. Now I was angry. Awfully hurt but clearly angry.

"All this is not in disrespect for your feelings, but in true respect. By now, I know you better than your father does, and you have nice gifts. I'll say no more. Your father is an enthusiast, and weak, on occasion, in judgment, but I pride myself on a cold eye. You have qualities that your father, for all his splendid stuff, is lacking."

Hugh Montague held up his glass. We would drink together. Then we shook hands and drove back to the house, and in the morning he left. ☐

NORMAN SEEFF



The Old Man and the Thumb

It was a brutal test of machismo, the ultimate mano a mano—Hemingway versus Plimpton in an evening of thumb-wrestling. The time was the late '50s. They squared off at a table by the kitchen door in one of Hemingway's favorite New York restaurants, The Colony. Blessed with a large, flexible thumb strength-

ened by hours of tennis, Plimpton trounced the old master, forcing Hemingway's thumb into submission again and again. But the literary lion left his mark on his young acolyte. Although Plimpton rose from the table triumphant, his hand was tattooed with vicious half-moons from Hemingway's stubborn grip.

STEVE BRODNER