



TO THE EDITOR:

Toward the end of Brigid Brophy's generous review of "The Prisoner of Sex" (May 23), she lights upon my phrase "politics rendered every pride" and concludes it is a malapropism. "'Surrendered' does he mean," asks Miss Brophy, "or 'rent'?" Well, I guess a number of us know something about the kitchen that Brigid don't. "Render" is used to describe that process where fat heated upon a fire is returned to oil and clarified of its impurities. So too can the hot and compromising hands held in politics melt pride on occasion down to shame. But how was it ever possible that the modest manifestos of "The Prisoner of Sex" could yet have rendered Brophy's nectar into surrenders of vinegar and rents of urea's hot torrent? Brave and broiling Brigid. We must find a man good enough to kiss her hem. Ahem! Yours, and cordially,

NORMAN MAILER

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INT. w Buzz Farbar

Marriage

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MAILER: Obviously there are all kinds of marriages. I suppose I was referring to people who are relatively independent, and sufficiently narcissistic to want to live their own kind of life. For them to be able to live with someone else is not an automatic venture. But then you can always find men and women who get married out of deep dependence on one another. Such marriages are usually a tyranny on one side, an enslavement on the other. Sometimes they are awful marriages where it may be a victory for the weak mate to split.

FARBAR: Do you feel you learned something from each marriage? Does each marriage get better, or worse, or is it all the same?

MAILER: Oh, each marriage is different. Being married to a woman is the equivalent, I think, of living in a major culture. Should you find yourself married to one woman and then to another, you have gone through the equivalent of spending five years in England after five years in France. So, it's

I don't look back on these marriages with bitterness. It seems to me you often get as much as you lost. I even discovered there may be four stages to knowing a woman. First, there's living together. It's often thought equal to marriage. Not by half. You can live with a woman and never begin to comprehend her at all, not until you get married to her. Once you do that, you're in the next stage. The third, obviously, is children. Once again your woman is different. Say it's analogous to a culture going through major transformations. The fourth stage is knowing a woman once you're divorced. Then, indeed, you can know something about her.

It weren't for the fact that there are children, there would be something almost agreeable about moving from marriage to marriage, just as there is something exciting about spending five years in England and five in France.

But there are children, and that's the vortex of all postmarital pain, which is always so surprisingly huge. Because finally the children come out of a vision in the marriage. It doesn't always even matter how casually they may have been conceived. Children can be created out of desperation, out of laziness, out of apathy, as a sporting proposition. But, usually, children come out of some covert union, some feeling that you have something together which should be embodied in a child. Otherwise, it's a little absurd to conceive. Therefore, once you have children, if the marriage breaks you can speak of it as failure. The vision that's embodied in that child is now broken. Not to count the damage to the child.

FARBAR: Knowing you as well as I do, I know that you are, to use your word "profoundly," a profoundly moral person —

MAILER: Can I interrupt you? ~~I'm usually called a profoundly moral person by people who are trying to stifle others who say I'm immoral or amoral, people who don't know much about my work and think of me as some sort of sexual ogre. Of course, my defenders then say, "On the contrary, he's a very moral man." I don't consider myself moral at all. I see myself as a man who lives in an embedded culture to morality. In other words, it isn't so much that I have an advanced sensibility toward what may be moral and immoral in my actions. Which I find intolerable as a result, because I know when I'm being immoral, and I'm being immoral most of the time. By my own lights. In other words, I'm so rarely true to my own code that it's hard to maintain any self-respect. But I would never speak of myself as a moral man. Quite the contrary.~~

~~FARBAR: Can you love deeply more than one woman? If you're committed to one woman, how do you feel about a relationship with another one at the same time? Do you feel good or bad during an affair?~~

~~MAILER: I think it's impossible to be in love with two women at the same time. By now, in the middle of the twentieth century, so few of us get anywhere near that kind of love that it seems a sentimental fallacy. Just think of the people we know. I think of speaking to them of love. A titter runs through the table. What does it mean to most people when you talk about being in love with two people at once? It means you're fucking two women at once, that's all it means.~~

~~But if you're really in love with a woman, I think it's almost impossible to be in love with another. If you love a woman, you are engaged in a vision with her. That rarely happens. Maybe two, three, four times in our lives. But once you do, every time you give something to another woman, the beginning of a different vision is being sent to a different place. It can only work successfully when you have people whose souls are neatly separated. I believe we all have divided souls, but few of us have souls that are divided formally — in other words, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Those two psyches can have two great love affairs, yes. But most of us have double personalities that are more amorphous. The edges interreact. They're never clear-cut. And it's not simple for us to decide what our two personalities might be. The borders are~~

~~ali in the room. Otherwise, it's hard to continue. Especially as you get older.~~

FARBAR: Do you feel, as I do, that when a woman says to you, "So-and-so is a lousy lay," you then feel ill-will toward her? Is that purely a male ego thing, not wanting to hear that another man was a bad lay?

MAILER: I'd say we usually take pleasure in hearing another man is a bad lay. But if we have any sense, we recognize it's mostly meaningless. If you hear all over town that a certain man is a bad lay from just about every woman who has spoken about him, there's a reasonable assumption the guy is not too good. But would you like to be described by a woman on the worst night you ever had in bed? Or any of the hundred worst nights? I dread to think of certain descriptions of me. Speaking just of performance, we have a spectrum. So when a woman says of a given man that he was a bad lay, I wince. Unless there's real cause, the woman is usually avenging herself. But then we know that women, maybe out of self-protection, lie a vast amount in sex, even lie to themselves about the past. We have all seen women who couldn't keep their hands off their man; then the years went by, and the man was out of her life. Slowly his sexual reputation sank, inch by inch. A part of the comedy of sexual affairs.

FARBAR: I wonder what your feelings are about promiscuity in women. And promiscuity in men.

MAILER: I suppose I believe you pay for every last thing you get out of life. Years ago, Calder Willingham told me a ~~story~~ about a situation where he tried every trick to make a woman leave him. Finally she began going with another man. Then he discovered he was jealous. He told this story on himself with great humor, and looked at me and said, "Norman, you can't cheat life." He said this in his inimitable Georgia accent. It's not a remark one hasn't heard before. But there's such a thing as hearing a maxim at just the right moment for oneself. Then it goes all the way in. So that remark stayed with me. Whenever I'm trying to work out some sort of moral balance for myself, I find the thought useful.

Of course, certain people get more out of being promiscuous than others, and pay less for it. But the idea that people can be promiscuous without exploiting their own sensitivity is impossible. On the other hand, promiscuity is altogether necessary for some, especially if you have a personality that consists of fragments, as most of us do by now. We live in a time of interruption. The art of the absurd is built on the fact that we live in a contin-

Brought her together with possible candidate.

uum of interruption. Turn on the television and see a story slam into an advertisement, and so forth. As a result, there's a huge tendency to become fragmented. Then different relations give us different things in different places.

But as you get older, you begin to discover that promiscuity gets more and more difficult, because it makes you commit too much of yourself. I'm fifty now. I've reached the point where conceivably I could be making love to a woman and die in bed. That can happen. If it did, which woman would I be with? Does one want to die with a stranger? As you get older, making love becomes more apocalyptic exactly because you're closer to the end of your life each time. As a result there's less desire to be promiscuous. On the other hand, if people are rooted in the promiscuous, the attempt to keep themselves monogamous can induce all sorts of neuroses and diseases, no question.

What I distrust always, however, are professional swingers. Come on, join the gangfuck, it's good for you. Those people are as totalitarian as the ones who say chastity is the only good on earth. ~~By now, they're more. Part of the totalitarian is to make an absolute out of the prevailing tendency of the time.~~

FARBAR: But if you pick up a girl in a bar at three in the morning and have a flying fuck at four and go home at five or six, that to me is not promiscuity. It's just something that happened. It's almost a physical act, like going to the bathroom. Don't you feel that?

MAILER: Yeah, but I hate it. Look, there are times when one has to depart from one's identity. As in *Last Tango in Paris* people making love without identity is exciting. Obviously, there is a need to treat sex as a species of evacuation. We've all had great fucks with people we hardly know. While that satisfies something, by now I hate it. Hate having too much sexual pleasure without feeling a great deal for the woman. I tend by now to stay away from fucking a girl I don't love but really enjoy fucking. I used to like that years ago, loved the power, but by now I kind of hate it. I hate the feeling afterward. I don't hate the fuck. I love the fuck, but I hate what comes afterward.

FARBAR: Because of the way you think she must feel when she knows it's a dead end?

MAILER: No. I'm not even thinking about her. Well, I'm thinking about her in the sense that I'm a guilty enough man so that I can't use people around me much anymore. We were speaking about morality earlier, and it isn't that I'm moral, it's almost rather that

I have enough respect for morality to feel I can't ~~abuse the edges of it forever, can't~~ abuse some of my central premises forever. I have this belief in karmic balance — that we come into life with a soul that carries an impost of guilt and reward from the past. And at the end of each life we may be reborn, which I think is a reward in itself. Which not everyone gets. Some people's souls die, literally die, just as the body dies; some people's souls die in a given life. As you know, I believe in two kinds of death. Final death as some species of oblivion, and transcendental death, where you're reborn in some other form of existence that gives fair measure for your previous lives. So I think as we get older there comes a time when we have to worry about this moral balance in ourselves. ~~Maybe I've come to the point where I can't use people anymore.~~ I do know it leaves me depressed to think I've had a woman for too little, offered no real feeling. I tend to stay away from such women. That wasn't true years ago.

FARBAR: That leads me to another question. How have you been able to maintain such extraordinarily good relationships with three of your four ex-wives? They truly seem to be your good friends. It's more than just being civilized, it's a special kind of talent, I think.

MAILER: I think we loved each other. I certainly loved each of them, and I believe they loved me. We have children together, and we love those children. When we broke up there was a recognition . . . well, we broke up for different reasons each time, but there was a recognition that there had to be something low about making the children suffer.

Of course, each time the marriage broke up, it was hardly agreeable or nice. Maybe over the years we've come together a little. When you're divorced from a woman, the friendship can then start. Because one's sexual vanity is not in it any longer. At least not in the same way. You can look back on it and say, "Yes, we were pretty good together, but not good enough." And let it go at that. Then, of course, everything in the woman you liked in the first place, her charm, the more attractive aspects of her character, now can come back into play, as well as everything that got lost in the harassments of marriage. A hint of tenderness returns.

When you're in love, the stakes are high. There's much more anger when there's love. Because if one's love is frustrated, it means a good deal more than if one's liking is balked. So there's a readiness in marriage to walk around in a state of resentment which starts to flatten all the smaller affections. Of course, there

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 { are marriages where the opposite occurs. When the sexual impulse quiets down or dies even, the people become great friends. Carnally speaking, they're divorced, but they don't separate legally. They live together as dear friends. Such marriages are often nice. I've never been in one, but I imagine it could be very nice.

FARBAR: Let's change the subject completely. I wonder how you felt about lesbianism. If you had any thought that you could —

MAILER: It's funny, you know, I've always had a puritanical attitude about homosexuality, almost as if I couldn't afford to begin to get homosexual, because God knows where it would all stop. You know about that old Talmudic notion, that if you want to restrain an impulse don't just build a fence around the impulse itself, build a fence around the fence. By analogy, I've never been tolerant of the idea of homosexuality for myself. But I've always had the feeling that if I were a woman, that I somehow would enjoy lesbianism. I think if I were a woman it would mean very little to me to be a lesbian part of the time.

FARBAR: Is that because lesbian women you've known or read about are always saying they know how to do whatever it is they're doing better than men do?

MAILER: Well, obviously there must be fine sensuality among lesbians. Listen, what am I edging around it for? I have seen women together and it's lovely. Or let us say, it is lovely provided it isn't finally designed to exclude men from every relation with women.

FARBAR: Last spring, in a piece in *New York Review of Books* on *Last Tango* you wrote about Brando and Maria Schneider being nameless when they meet each other, and this made their sexual relationship intriguing. As soon as some sort of relationship begins, and they get to know one another's names, it ends. Why do women enjoy anonymous sex?

MAILER: I think once a woman becomes anonymous in a sexual relationship — it's as if she's weightless. She no longer has the gravity of old responsibility. She can cut loose.

But I think one thing's rarely understood about promiscuity. In *Last Tango* there's that line "Fuck God," with which the picture begins — you can hardly hear it. Brando screams it as the Metro goes overhead. One of the profoundest motives in promiscuity and in perversion is fuck God. God, I'm defying you. Almost basic human emotion. Now, whether we actually defy God when we think we do, or are unwittingly dignifying Him, even expressing His will, which has been kept from us for two thousand

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years — in other words, it is the pagan who expresses the will of God rather than the Christian — that we don't know. But the impulse is there.

What we can count on is that when a woman throws off her social responsibility, her tendency is to be wilder than a man. Not only in anonymous relations but in orgies. Is there anything in the literature of orgy that doesn't suggest that women are always wilder? After men are used up, the women get together. They can make love to one another for hours until the men are restored. Or maybe it's that women sit upon an endless well of sexuality.

~~As men have to keep rebuilding it~~

FARBAR: The opposite of orgy is marriage, I suppose. Do you feel that you are still married, in some karmic sense, or some essence of you is still married to each of your wives, and you are never away from them?

MAILER: No, but it's possible certain relations continue from one life to another. Because of a great love or a great hatred, or perhaps because they're unfulfilled.

The logic of karma, it seems to me, is that God, whatever His other motivations, may as well be considered some kind of cosmic artist, engaged in a dialogue, at the least, about the nature of existence with other cosmic artists in other parts of the universe, other gods. So the point of karma may be to enable Him to go back to certain projects, just as an artist sometimes wishes to improve his first attempt. Sometimes what an artist does is perfect. Sometimes one wants to work it further, go to the point where you can do better or, if not, know you've failed and abandon the notion. Perhaps human souls represent some of the most poignant notions of God. You see, there's an extraordinary beauty in the potential of most human relations if we're willing to assume that under all the absurdities, all the spleen and waste and brutality, there's a blocked aesthetic conception. Maybe that's why I object to some of the more casual forms of promiscuity. I don't object across the board. There are times when you need a fuck the way you need a shit. Simple as that. Let's not pretend. ~~One of the~~ But ~~troubles with promiscuous fucking is that you not only get the wastes out, but take in waste from the other person's system. You shit on them, and they shit on you. I think one of the best lines in Marilyn is, "Less is known about the true transactions of fucking sex than any science on earth."~~

FARBAR: Well then, why do so many women look upon the sex act in a much more holy way than a man does?

MAILER: They do, they don't. Some have absolute contempt for sex. Probably just as many women think of sex as evacuation as men. They enjoy sex, but despise it. One of the drives in women's lib is to insist that women are absolutely as cynical about sex as men and have the right to be absolutely as cynical.

FARBAR: Remember when the Pill first came on the scene and made a lot of young people very happy? There was a lot of screwing, and then gradually, the way it is now, there seems to be less joy in sex. When I was eighteen or twenty, I'd be screwing my brains out if it were possible.

MAILER: You were screwing your brains out because it was a criminal activity in your day, and so offered more pleasure than law-abiding activity. Which has been my argument about permissiveness in sex from the beginning. It's why I'm opposed to legalization of marijuana. Reduce the penalties, but don't have marijuana legal. The corporation will take it over. Marijuana with filter-tip cigarettes. You'll have vitamins in the marijuana, and every pollution of advertising. You'll come to hate the very thought of smoking because they'll be working their scheme on you.

By the same token, the moment you get too much permissiveness in sex, you get pulled into somebody else's manipulation scheme. My idea these years is that total promiscuity is the unstated need of the technological society. Its impulse is to accept indiscriminate fucking. It wants humans to become units. About the time we no longer distinguish between a man and a woman, he-she has become an interchangeable sexual part. We put it into the hole of those weaker than us, and get it put into our own hole by those stronger; we become a link in a technological chain of sex.

I've always hated the Pill. It reduces the fuck to a species of upper masturbation. Part of the beauty of the fuck was that you were taking a terrible chance. You could knock the girl up, and if you did, then by God you found out what you really felt about her, how phony were you, how true. When a woman comes to you and says she's pregnant, you know more about what you feel for her than you did before.

All right, the women will counter and say, That's good for you, finding your identity, but we're losing ours. Because we have to get butchered by abortionists. I've never been able to answer this. I will agree that the absence of the Pill was better for the sanity of men than women. I think women, if they are willing to look at

themselves in such fashion, are in the embattled position. Since they are closer to creation, they have to pay more for the privilege. They hate it now. They hate it because we live in a technological world, where to be pregnant means that you're removed for a time from the major scene, which is to say the whole technological process. The last power of the human heart as we approach apocalypse is ambition. Everybody gets more ambitious to be in on more. If we can't wield the power, then we want to be in on the shaping of the power.

FARBAR: What about legalized abortion?

MAILER: I think when a woman goes through an abortion, even legalized abortion, she goes through hell. There's no use hoping otherwise. For what is she doing? Sometimes she has to be saying to herself, "You're killing the memory of a beautiful fuck." I don't think abortion is a great strain when the act was some miserable little screech, or some squeak oozed up through the trapdoor, a little rat which got in, a worm who slithered under the threshold. That sort of abortion costs a woman little more than discomfort. Unless there are medical consequences years later.

But if a woman has a great fuck, and then has to abort, it embitters her. A profound and awful transaction. The Pill didn't come into existence for nothing.

FARBAR: Do you see any future in a formal structure of marriage? Many young people in various strata of society are no longer getting married.

MAILER: We return to our beginning. I think marriage has a future of a sort. I think it's going to become a classical demand ~~on people~~. Of course, few people are interested in classical demands. Those who are will look upon marriage with more regard than they have in a century. Because it's not going to be easy to imagine a man and woman getting married when they're young and both virgins, say at the age of eighteen or twenty or twenty-two, and then proceeding to live in happiness and fidelity for fifty or sixty years in order to die together. That is soon going to be equal in difficulty to pitching a no-hitter. And will be respected in the same fashion. The virtuosity of the demand is finally going to keep marriage alive. Not necessarily as a fundamental social institution, but as a grand curiosity. Because there will always be that human wonder. Maybe that was the way it was supposed to be. Maybe there is nothing more beautiful than one man and one woman managing to be that much to each other. What courage it takes, what extraordinary leaps, what a transcendent vision one

needs of the mate. What a transcendent vision one needs of existence in order to ride out the boredom, the entrenched monotonies, the temptations, the small betrayals, the social pressures, and finally the huge social weight of that oncoming future, which will hardly encourage anyone to remain faithful, for to stay in marriage will appear absurd.

The point is you can't cheat life. Go back to Willingham's notion. You pay for everything. The worst notion afoot among the young people I know is that you can get fucking for nothing. You don't get it that way. You pay for fucking with your life and you end with your death. Then something in the balance of things may decide whether you've earned your reincarnation. The new life we're given may be the closest we ever come to the truth.

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