

THE DEAD ARE DYING OF THIRST

not knowing how to write. My strength is in the same place as Samson's hair. Reading and writing is Delilah to me. I don't want to lose the magic God alone gave me. I got to fight for my boy," he said. "He's in there to fight. I got to be there too." He offered one fine confidence. "I'm sharpening the spike. I'm going to give Foreman's people the needle tonight."

"How do you do that?"

"Oh, I'm going up to them to put some money on Ali. But I won't ask for 3 to 1. I'm going to give two thousand dollars against their three. That got to worry them. They be wondering where I get the confidence. It go right back to George Foreman."

"You have a real two thousand dollars?"

"Better be real!"

They laughed.

And so in the middle of the ~~same~~ lobby ^{having} where Bundini had been ~~outshouted by Elmo Henderson on Sunday morning. Bundini returned to joust on Sunday night. Elmo was not about. For certain, Bundini must have picked a time when Elmo was not about.~~

Having attracted some of Foreman's people, the sparring partner Stan Ward among them, Bundini began to jeer. "I don't want 3 to 1, I don't need 3 to 1. My man is 3 to 1."

"Then give us 3 to 1," said Stan Ward.

"I would. If God was here, I would. But He ain't. He don't associate with flunkies who work for George Foreman, that big man, that big white man. I don't give you 3 to 1 because I don't give no advantage to people who work for the White Man."

KING OF THE FLUNKIES

"Then why you asking 3 to 2 instead of 3 to 1," someone said suspiciously.

"Because you the bullies. Anybody works for the White Man is a bully. A bully needs advantage. I'm giving you advantage. You go out in the casinos and try to get your bet. You have to lay three to get one. You people are too fucking scared to do that. 'Cause you know the White Man upstairs. You know his faults. You know you going to lose."

"Foreman ain't going to lose," said Stan Ward.

"Give me *your* bet," said Bundini.

"How much you laying?"

"My two thousand dollars is in my hands," said Bundini pulling out a roll. "Now show me, nigger, where your three thousand dollars is."

"I can't get it right away," said Ward. "But I'll have it in the morning. I'll meet you here at eleven in the morning."

"Yeah, if the White Man tells you to go ahead and pee, then you can piss," said Bundini.

"He ain't the White Man."

"Shit, he ain't. There he is in the Olympics, a big fat fool dancing around with an eentsy American flag in his big dumb fist. He don't know what to do with a fist. My man does. My man got his fist in the air when he wins. Power to the People! That's my man. Millions follow him. Who follows your man? He's got nobody to follow him," said Bundini, "that's why he keeps a *dog*." The followers of Foreman suddenly roared with happiness. The kuntu was audacity and they paid their respects to the spirit of audacity embodied in Bundini. "What are you ready to die for?" asked Bundini. He answered them, "Nothing. You

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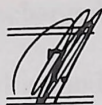
ain't ready for nothing. But I'm ready to die for Muhammad. I put my bread on the line. I don't have to consult and come back here at eleven in the morning with my dick in my hand, permission to piss. I put my bread on the line. If I got no bread, I'm dead. If I got no loaves, I'm cold stone in the oven," crooned Bundini. "That's what it's all about. Muhammad Ali has Bundini ready to die, and what does the White Man have? Twenty-two niggers and a dog."

Foreman's people roared with all the happiness of knowing that Foreman would win and that the spirit of audacity was nonetheless not dead. A very heavyset Negro with a cane for his game leg and heavy horn-rimmed glasses for his game eyes gave a peal of shrill laughter high as a spurt of water shooting up, and held out his palm.

Bundini struck it, showed his own palm, the man struck it back. Happiness. If words were blows, Bundini was champ of the kingdom of flunkies. Long live Nommo, spirit of words.

PP 81-94

1740



Long Voyage

HE COULD GO back to the Inter-Continental, eat early and try to get some sleep before the run, but sleep was not likely between eight in the evening and midnight — besides there was no question of keeping up with Muhammad. His conscience, however (now on the side of good journalism), was telling him that the better his own condition, the more he would be able to discern about Ali's. What a pity he had not been jogging since the summer. Up in Maine he had done two miles every other day, but jogging was one discipline he could not maintain. At five feet eight inches and one hundred and seventy pounds, Norman was simply too heavy to enjoy running. He could jog at a reasonable gait — fifteen minutes for two miles was good time for him — and if pushed, he could jog three miles, conceivably four, but he hated it. Jogging disturbed the character of one's day. He did not feel refreshed afterward but overstimulated and irritable. The truth of jogging was it only felt good when you stopped. And he would remind himself that with the exception of Erich Segal and

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George Gilder, he had never heard of a writer who liked to run — who wanted the brilliance of the mind discharged through the ankles?

Back in Kinshasa, he decided to have drinks and a good meal after all, and during dinner there was amusement at the thought he would accompany Ali on the road. "You know you have to do it," said John Vinocur of the AP. "I know," said Mailer, in full gloom. "Ali isn't expecting me to show up, but he won't forgive it if I don't." "That's right, that's right," said Vinocur, "I offered to run with Foreman once, and when I didn't get there, he never let me forget. He brings it up every time I see him."

"Plimpton, you've got to come with me," said Mailer.

George Plimpton wasn't sure he would. Mailer knew he wouldn't. Plimpton had too much to lose. With his tall thin track man's body and his quietly buried competitive passion (large as Vesuvius, if smokeless) Plimpton would have to keep on some kind of close terms with Ali or pay a disproportionate price in humiliation. Whereas it was easy for Mailer. If he didn't get a leg cramp in the first five hundred yards, he could pick the half-mile mark to take his bow. He just hoped Ali didn't run too fast. That would be jogger's hell. At the thought of being wiped out from the start, a little bile rose from the drinks and the rich food. It was now only nine in the evening, but his stomach felt as if the forces of digestion were in stupor.

Still, it was a good meal. They were eating in the open air with the funky grandeur of a dilapidated grand hotel for backdrop. The Palace Hotel. It was now an apartment house and offered its miasma — there was from time to

time an operative whiff of what Victorians used to call *the smell of drains*. The toilet in the restroom was rimless, a needless even excrementitious detail if not for the fact that our man of wisdom was hoping to move himself properly before going out to run, but the sight of the bowl, the missing seat and the indescribable condition closed off his chances. Worse may have been glimpsed in many an American gas station, but never so settled in. SANICONGO was the brand name of the toilet, and it looked to have been installed in time for the coronation of King Leopold. Maybe the bowl even had its kuntu, for when he got back to the table, Horst Fass was telling stories about Vietnam, and they were in the mode of SANICONGO. Fass worked with Vinocur, and had the job — no casual responsibility — of making certain the communications of the AP would get out for the fight, a nightmare of telephones, teletypes, Telexes, Telstars and hysterical assistants. He was a cool and cheerful young German with all the confidence of his trades — not only a top technician but a reporter, a cameraman. He had been the AP man in many a war, many a port and many an international conference: not surprising that he also had a journalist's eye for the fine stories that cannot be used. So Mailer and Plimpton learned for the first time — be certain their mouths were open — that certain Americans in Nam had volunteered to be undertakers because they were connoisseurs of necrophilia and enjoyed making love to parts of a human body rather than the predictable dead whole. Fass told this with the expression of a man who has seen everything and so will never again be shocked but is nonetheless attached to the detail because it is an

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example of the extreme. As if this story, however, had been entree of wild boar, and one needed sherbet for dessert, Fass offered a touching tale about the brothels managed by the U.S. Army, a preventive measure against the special virulence of Vietnamese V.D.; there in the military brothels, the girls wore yellow and red badges, one color underwriting disease-free copulation and the other holding them in temporary chastity. Nonetheless, they could still work. At a lower rate. They were on hand for men who just wished to talk to a girl. "They did good business," said Fass. "A lot of the GIs just wanted to talk."

A little later, they all went to a Casino and played Black Jack. The thought that he would run with Ali was beginning to offer its agreeable tension, a sensation equal to the way he felt when he was going to win at Black Jack. Gambling had its own libido. Just as one was ill-advised to make love when libido was dim, so was that a way to lose money in gambling. Whenever he felt empty, he dropped his stake; when full of himself, he often won. Every gambler was familiar with the principle—it was visceral, after all—few failed to disobey it in one fashion or another. But never had he felt its application so powerfully as in Africa. It was almost as if one could make a living in Kinshasa provided one gambled only when one's blood was up.

Naturally, he drank a little. He had friends at this Casino. The manager was a young American not yet twenty-one and in love with the taste of his life in Africa; the croupiers and dealers were English girls, sharp as birds in their accents—the keen vibrating intelligence of the London

working class was in their quick voices. He was getting *mal d'Afrique*, the sweet infection that forbids you to get out of Africa (in your mind, at least) once you have visited it. What intoxication to gamble and know in advance whether one would win or lose. Even orange juice and vodka gave its good thump. He was loving everything about the evening but the sluggishness of his digestion. Pocketing his money, he went back to the hotel to put on a T-shirt and exercise pants.

The long drive to Nsele, forty-five minutes and more, confirmed him in the first flaw of his life. He was a monster of bad timing. Why had he not paced himself so that the glow he was feeling at the Casino would be with him when he ran? Now his n'golo was fading with the drinks. By the time they hit the road, he would have to work off the beginnings of a hangover. And his stomach, that invariably reliable organ, had this night simply not digested his food. My God. A thick fish chowder and a pepper steak were floating down the Congo of his inner universe like pads of hyacinth in the clotted Zaïre. My God, add ice cream, rum and tonic, vodka and orange juice. Still, he did not feel sick, just turgid — a normal state for his fifty-one years, his heavy meals, and this hour.

It was close to three in the morning as he reached Nsele, and he would have preferred to go to sleep. He was even ready to consider turning around without seeing Ali. By now, however, that was hardly a serious alternative.

But the villa was dark. Maybe Ali would not run tonight. A couple of soldiers, polite but somewhat confused by the sight of visitors at this hour — Bob Drew, a camera-

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man from the AP, was also waiting — asked them not to knock on the door. So they all sat in the dark for a quarter of an hour, and then a few lights went on in the villa, and Howard Bingham, a young Black from *Sports Illustrated* who had virtually become Ali's private photographer, came by and brought them in. Ali was still sleepy. He had gone to bed at nine and just awakened, the longest stretch of sleep he would take over twenty-four hours. Later, after running, he might nap again, but sleep never seemed as pervasive a concern to him as to other fighters.

"You did come," he said with surprise, and then seemed to pay no further attention. He was doing some stretching exercises to wake up and had the surliness of any infantryman awakened in the middle of the night. They would make four for the run. Bingham was coming along and Pat Patterson, Ali's personal bodyguard, a Chicago cop, no darker than Ali, with the solemn even stolid expression of a man who has gone through a number of doors in his life without the absolute certainty that he would walk out again. By day, he always carried a pistol; by night — what a pity not to remember if he strapped a holster over his running gear.

Ali looked sour. The expression on his face was not difficult to read. Who wanted to run? He gave an order to one of the two vans that would accompany them, telling it to be certain to stay well behind, so that its fumes would not bother them. The other had Bob Drew inside to take photographs, and it was allowed to stay even.

Norman may have hoped the fighter would want to walk for a while, but Ali right away took off at a slow jogger's

LONG VOYAGE

gait, and the others fell in. They trotted across the grass of the villas set parallel to the river and, when they came to the end of the block, took a turn toward the highway two miles off and kept trotting at the same slow pace past smaller villas, a species of motel row where some of the press was housed. It was like running in the middle of the night across suburban lawns on some undistinguished back street of Beverly Hills, an occasional light still on in a room here and there, one's eyes straining to pick up the drive-ways one would have to cross, the curbings, and the places where little wire fences protected the plantings. Ali served as a guide, pointing to holes in the ground, sudden dips, and slippery spots where hoses had watered the grass too long. And they went on at the same slow steady pace. It was, in fact, surprisingly slow, certainly no faster than his own rate when jogging by himself, and Norman felt, everything considered, in fairly good condition. His stomach was already a full soul of heated lead, and it was not going to get better, but to his surprise, it was not getting worse — it seemed to have settled in as one of the firm discontents he would have on this run.

After they had gone perhaps half a mile, Ali said, "You're in pretty good shape, Norm."

"Not good enough to talk," he answered through closed teeth.

Jogging was an act of balance. You had to get to the point where your legs and your lungs worked together in some equal state of exertion. They could each be close to overexertion, but if one was not more fatigued than the other, they offered some searing and hardworking equiva-

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lent of the tireless, to wit, you would feel no more abominable after a mile than after the first half mile. The trick was to reach this disagreeable state without having to favor the legs or the lungs. Then, if no hills were there to squander one's small reserve, and one did not lose stride or have to stop, if one did not stumble and one did not speak, that steady progressive churning could continue, thoroughgoing, raw to one's middle-aged insides, but virtuous — one felt like the motors of an old freighter.

After a few weeks of steady running, one could take the engines of the old freighter through longer and longer storms, one could manage hills, one could even talk (and how well one could ski later in the year with the legs built up!) but now his body has been docked for two months and he was performing a new kind of balancing act. It was not only his legs and his lungs but the gauges on the bile in his stomach he had to watch, and the pressure on his heart. If he had always run before breakfast, and so was unaccustomed to jogging with food in his stomach, he was having an education in that phenomenon now. It was a third factor, hot, bilious, and working like a bellows in reverse, for it kept pushing up a pressure on his lungs, yet, to his surprise, not nauseating, just heavy pressure, so that he knew he could not keep up with a faster pace more than a little before his stomach would be engorging his heart and both pounding in his ears.

Still, they had covered what must be three-quarters of a mile by now and were long past the villas and formal arrangement of Nsele's buildings, and just padded along on a back road with the surprisingly disagreeable exhaust of the lead van choking their nostrils. What a surprising im-

pediment to add to the run — it had to be worse than cigar smoke at ringside, and to this pollution of air came an intermittent freaking of a photographic flash pack from Bob Drew's camera.

Still, he had acquired his balance. What with food, drink, and lack of condition, it was one of the most unpleasant runs he had ever made, certainly the most caustic in its preview of hell, but he had found his balance. He kept on running with the others, the gait most happily not stepped up, and came to recognize after a while that Ali was not a bad guy to run with. He kept making encouraging comments, "Hey, you're doin' fine, Norm," and, a little later, "Say, you're in good condition," to which the physical specimen could only grunt for reply — mainly it was the continuing sense of a perfect pace to Ali's legs that helped the run, as if his own legs were somehow being tuned to pick their own best rate, yes, something easy and uncompetitive came off Ali's good stride.

"How old are you, Norm?"

He answered in two bursts, "Fifty — one."

"Say, when I'm fifty-one, I won't be strong enough to run to the corner," said Ali. "I'm feeling tired already."

They jogged. Wherever possible, Ali ran on the turf. Pat Patterson, used to pounding concrete, ran on the paving of the road, and Bingham alternated. Norman stayed on the turf. It was generally easier on the feet and harder on the lungs to jog over grass, and his lungs so close to the pressure of his stomach were more in need than his legs, but he could not keep the feel of Ali's easy rhythm if he left the turf.

On they went. Now they were passing through a small

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forest, and by his measure, they had come a little more than a mile. He was beginning to think it was remotely possible that he could cover the entire distance — was it scheduled for three miles? — but even as he was contemplating the heroics of this horror they entered on a long slow grade uphill, and something in the added burden told him that he was not going to make it without a breakdown in the engines. His heart had now made him prisoner — it sat in an iron collar around his neck, and as they chugged up the long slow grade, the collar tightened every fifty feet. He was breathing now as noisily as he had ever breathed, and recognized that he was near to the end of his run.

“Champ,” he said, “I’m going — to stop — pretty soon,” a speech in three throttled bursts. “I’m just — holding you — back,” and realized it was true — except how could Ali put up with too slow a gait when the fight was just four nights away? “Anyway — have good run,” he said, like the man in the water waving in martyred serenity at the companions to whom he has just offered his spot in the lifeboat. “I’ll see you — back there.”

And he returned alone. Later, when he measured it by the indicator on his car, he found that he had run with them for a mile and a half, not too unrespectable. And enjoyed his walk. Actually, he was a little surprised at how slow the pace had been. It seemed unfitting that he had been able to keep up as long as he had. If Ali were going to run for fifteen rounds, there should, he thought, be something more kin to a restlessness in his legs tonight. Of course, Ali was not wearing sneakers but heavy working shoes. Still. The leisureliness of the pace made him uneasy.

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There is no need to follow Norman back on his walk, except that we are about to discover a secret to the motivation of writers who achieve a bit of prominence in their own time. As the road continued through the forest, dark as Africa is ever supposed to be, he was enjoying for the first time a sense of what it meant to be out alone in the African night, and occasionally, when the forest thinned, knew what it might also mean to be alone under an African sky. The clarity of the stars! The size of the bowl of heaven! Truth, thoughts after running are dependably banal. Yet what a teeming of cricket life and locusts in the brush about him, that nervous endless vibration seeming to shake the earth. It was one of the final questions: Were insects a part of the cosmos or the termites of the cosmos?

Just then, he heard a lion roar. It was no small sound, more like thunder, and it opened an unfolding wave of wrath across the sky and through the fields. Did the sound originate a mile away, or less? He had come out of the forest, but the lights of Nsele were also close to a mile away, and there was all of this deserted road between. He could never reach those lights before the lion would run him down. Then his next thought was that the lion, if it chose, could certainly race up on him silently, might even be on his way now.

Once, sailing in Provincetown harbor on nothing larger than a Sailfish, he had passed a whale. Or rather the whale passed him. A frolicsome whale ~~which~~ ^{that} cavorted in its passage and was later to charm half the terrified boats in its path. He had recognized at the moment that there was nothing he could ever do if the whale chose to swallow him

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with his boat. Yet he felt singularly cool. What a perfect way to go. His place in American literature would be forever secure. They would seat him at Melville's feet. Melville and Mailer, ah, the consanguinity of the M's and the L's — how critics would love Mailer's now discovered pre-occupations (see Croft on the mountain in *The Naked and the Dead*) with Ahab's Moby Dick.

Something of this tonic sangfroid was with him now. To be eaten by a lion on the banks of the Congo — who could fail to notice that it was Hemingway's own lion waiting down these years for the flesh of Ernest until an appropriate substitute had at last arrived?

They laughed back at Ali's villa when he told them about the roar. He had forgotten Nsele had a zoo and lions might as well be in it.

Ali looked tired. He had run another mile and a half, he would estimate, three miles in all, and had sprinted uphill for the last part, throwing punches, running backward, then all-out forward again, and was very tired now. "That running," he said, "takes more out of me than anything I ever felt in the ring. It's even worse than the fifteenth round, and that's as bad as you can get."

Like an overheated animal, Ali was lying on the steps of his villa, cooling his body against the stone, and Bingham, Patterson and Ali did not talk too much for a while. It was only 4 A.M. but the horizon was beginning to lighten — the dawn seemed to come in for hours across the African sky. Predictably, Ali was the one to pick up conversation again. His voice was surprisingly hoarse: he sounded as if a cold were coming on. That was all Ali needed — a chest cold for

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the fight! Pat Patterson, hovering over him like a truculent nurse, brought a bottle of orange juice and scolded him for lying on the stone, but Ali did not move. He was feeling sad from the rigors of the workout and talked of Jurgin Blin and Blue Lewis and Rudi Lubbers. "Nobody ever heard of them," he said, "until they fought me. But they trained to fight me and fought their best fights. They were good fighters against me," he said almost with wonder. (Wonder was as close as he ever came to doubt.) "Look at Bugner — his greatest fight was against me. Of course, I didn't train for any of them the way they trained for me. I couldn't. If I trained for every fight the way I did for this, I'd be dead. I'm glad I left myself a little bit for this one." He shook his head in a blank sort of self-pity as if some joy that once resided in his juices had been expended forever. "I'm going to get one million three hundred thousand for this fight, but I would give one million of that up gladly if I could just buy my present condition without the work."

Yet his present condition was so full of exhaustion. As if anxiety about the fight stirred in the hour before dawn, a litany began. It was the same speech he had made a day and a half ago to the press, the speech in which he listed each of Foreman's opponents and counted the number who were nobodies and the inability of Foreman to knock his opponents out cold. Patterson and Bingham nodded in the sad patience of men who worked for him and loved him and put up with this phase of his conditioning while Ali gave the speech the way a patient with a threatening heart will take a nitroglycerin pill. And Norman, with his food still undigested and his bowels hard packed from the shock

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of the jogging, was blank himself when he tried to think of amusing conversation to divert Ali's mood. It proved up to Ali to change the tone and by the dawn he did. After showering and dressing he showed a magic trick and then another, long cylinders popping out of his hands to become handkerchiefs, and, indeed, next day at training, still haranguing the press, Ali ended by saying, "Foreman will never catch me. When I meet George Foreman, I'll be free as a bird," and he held up his hand and opened it. A bird flew out. To the vast delight of the press. Ali was writing the last line of their daily piece from Kinshasa today. Nor did it take them long to discover the source. Bundini had captured the bird earlier in the day and slipped it to Ali when the time came. Invaluable Bundini, improvisatory Bundini.

Still, as Norman drove home to the Inter-Continental and breakfast, he measured Ali's run. He had finished by the Chinese pagoda. That was two and a half miles, not three! Ali had run very slowly for the first mile and a half. With an empty stomach and the fair condition of the summer in Maine, he thought he could probably have kept up with Ali until the sprint at the end. It was no way for a man fighting for a Heavyweight title to do roadwork. Norman did not see how Ali could win. Defeat was in the air Ali alone seemed to refuse to breathe *the fear of the people close to him.*

The Impresario

ELMO R. ZAHNE

1754

Start

King had magical eyes. Until one met him, it was hard to understand how he could possibly have managed to bring the fighters together, for he had few financial resources to match an event of this scope. King ~~however~~ Don ~~had~~ ^{however} the ability to take all his true love (which given his substantial Black presence was not necessarily small) plus all of his false love, and pour them out together through his eyes, his lambent eyes. Mailer had never believed in the real existence out in the field of the word lambent but then he had never looked before into a pair of eyes as full of love. "You are a genius in tune with the higher consciousness," King offered as the first compliment on meeting, "yet an instinctive exponent of the untiring search for aspiration in the warm earth-embracing potential of exploited peoples." Norman had once known a Rumanian doctor with just such a mouth-filling taste for rhetoric and pastrami. Don King was a cross between a Negro Heavyweight large as Ernie Terrell and that Jewish Rumanian doctor, nay, King was even B'nai Brith-ical. He could not say *ecstatic* if you did not let him add *with delight*. Occasions were never joyous if they could be *very joyous*. After a while Mailer realized that the description of himself offered with such generosity by King was in fact a way of letting you in on King's view of himself — "a genius in tune with the higher consciousness," et cetera.

Say, it would be hard to prove King was not a genius. A former nightclub owner and numbers king of Cleveland with four years in jail for killing a man in a street fight, he had approached Ali and Foreman with the splendid credentials of a fight manager whose two best fighters, Earnie Shavers and Jeff Merritt, had just both been knocked out in

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the first round. Still, he offered to promote Ali-Foreman. Each fighter would get five million dollars, he said. Those eyes of true love must have made the sum believable, for they glowed doubtless with the cool delights of lemonade, the fantasies of Pernod, and the golden kernels of corn — somehow, those eyes took him through barriers — he convinced Herbert Muhammad that he could produce this fight. “I reminded him of the teaching of his father Elijah Muhammad that every qualified Black man should be given a chance by his fellow Black men.” Of course, the more cynical were quick to point out that Herbert Muhammad had little to lose — King was quickly locked into a contract where he had to pay \$100,000 a month every month until a letter of credit for the \$10,000,000 was in the bank for both fighters, and King, to everybody’s surprise, managed to hang on long enough to raise the money through John Daly of Helmdale Leisure Corp, and Risnailia, a Swiss corporation whose heart belonged, it was said, to Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga, our own Mobutu. What skills. Quantity changes quality, Engels said once, and a hustler of dimensions is a financier. How King could talk. He was a tall man, but his graying hair stood up four inches from his head, straight up, straight up — he was one Black whose Afro was electrified by a perpetually falling elevator — *whoosh* went the hair up from his head. Down came his words. King wore diamonds and pleated shirts, dashikis with gold pendants, powder-blue tuxedos and suits of lipstick-red; the cummerbunds of a sultan were about his waist, and the pearls of the Orient in the cloth he wore. How he could talk. He was the kuntu of full dialogue, and

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no verbal situation could be foreign to him. Once when one of his lesser-known fighters hinted that a contract was unsatisfactory and King could get hurt, Don leaned forward — fond 'was he of telling this story — and said, "Let us not bullshit each other. You can leave here, make a call, and have me killed in half an hour. I can pick up the phone as you leave and have you offed in five minutes." That was expression appropriate to the point, but King could cut a wider path. "The fight," he said, "will draw a trillion fans, because Ali is Russian, Ali is Oriental, Ali is Arabic, Ali is Jewish, Ali is everything that one could conceive with the human mind. He appeals to all segments of our world. Some polarize themselves with hostility and affection, but regardless he stimulates — and this is the most significant part — Ali motivates even the dead." Yes, even the dead who were dying of thirst and waiting for beer at the altar. "The dead tremble in their graves" was what King said as Leonard Gardner reported it in Caracas on the night Foreman annihilated Norton and the last impediment to Ali-Foreman was gone. King had been happy that night, and he was happy this night with the weigh-in staged and the television satellite tested and proved. He was a man who obviously placed serious investments of faith in formal ceremony, and that ~~same stadium which proved so sinister to his guest~~ brought tears to King's eyes as he spoke of it. "Tonight has been a culmination," he said. "Tonight the history of our problems on this fight become converted to the history of our hard-working triumphs. I had a vision tonight of the event to come and it leaves me ebullient for I see an encounter that will be without compare in the relentless power of its

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tenacity and fury. Therefore it occasions in me the emotion that I am an instrument of eternal forces."

Once you became accustomed to the stately seesaw of his rhetoric it gave nourishment to your ear the way a Cossack's horse in full stride would give drumbeats to the steppes. Still, it became evident after a while that King whipped his tongue for rhetoric when he did not have a finer reply. (As Shaw once assured Sam Goldwyn, poetry was there to write when he did not feel inspired for prose.) So King shifted gears whenever the beginnings of a small distance were sensed between himself and the person to whom he spoke; when he rapped, however, ah, then King became the other man in himself.

He liked to talk about his four years in prison and his five unsuccessful appearances before a parole board. "My past was jamming me with those people, you see. I had to put in the years, had to learn how to rechannel myself, and be able to meditate in a room full of violent men. No easy task. It was sheer hell just to go to the hole. You could wake up in the middle of the night and have to take a leak. What a sight in the urinals. Prisoners sucking guards. Guards going down on prisoners. One man taking another's ass. Hell, man, you got to get your head in order."

At the next table, Hunter Thompson leaned over to John Vinocur and said, "Bad Genet."

"I decided to study," said King. "I got myself a list. Got my education in prison. Read Freud. He almost blew my mind. Breast, penis, anus. Powerful stuff. Then Masters and Johnson, Kinsey, and . . ." He hesitated. "Knee's itch, I read a lot of him."

"Who?"

"Knee's itch. Nigh zith."

"Nietzsche?"

"Yeah." But the error had him jiving for embarrassment.

"Yeah, cerebrum and cerebellum, you got to use them, that's what I learned from that man."

"Who else did you read?"

"Kant — *The Critique of Pure Reason*. That helped my head. And I read Sartre — fascinating! — and then the guy who wrote the book on Hitler, Shirer, I read him. And Marx, I read Karl Marx, a cold motherfucker, Marx. I learned a lot from him. Hitler and Marx — I think of them in relation to some of the things they're doing here, you know, the country is the family. Concentrate on the young."

At the next table, Hunter Thompson having finished his drink, said, "Very bad Genet."

But King did not hear him. Why should King care? He had probably read Genet. The fatigue and happiness of the thousand perils of successfully promoting this fight sat in kindly weight upon his back. "Yes," he said, "I look upon tonight as a classically satisfying experience."

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~~12.~~

The Dressing Room

IT WAS a grim dressing room. Perhaps it looked like a comfort station in a Moscow subway. Big, with round pillars tiled in white, even the wallpaper was white. So it also looked like an operating room. In this morgue all groans were damped. White tile was everywhere. What a place to get ready!

The men gathered had no more cheer than the decor. Dundee, Pacheco, Plimpton, Mailer, Walter Youngblood, Pat Patterson, Howard Bingham, Ali's brother Rachman, his manager, Herbert Muhammad, his business manager, Gene Kilroy, Bundini, a small fat Turk named Hassan, and Roy Williams, his sparring partner, were in the room and no one had anything to say. "What's going on here," said Ali as he entered. "Why is everybody so scared? What's the matter with you." He began to peel off his clothes, and wearing no more than a jockstrap was soon prancing around the room, shadowboxing with the air.

~~Roy Williams, dressed to go into the ring for his semi-final fight with Henry Clark, was sitting on the wall.~~

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table. Through a miscalculation of others, he had arrived at the stadium with the convoy, too late for a ten-round semifinal. They were planning to hold it now after the main event, not the easiest delay for a fighter.

"Scared, Roy?" Ali asked as he danced by him.

"Not a drop," answered Williams in a rich and quiet voice. He was the blackest man in the room, also the gentlest.

"We're going to dance," cried Ali as he flew around, enjoying each near collision with the pillars at his back. Like a child, he had a sense of objects behind him as if the circle of his sensations did not end at his skin. "Ah, yes," he shouted out, "we're going to stick him," and he threw jabs at the air.

~~With the exception of Roy Williams,~~ he was the only cheerful presence. "I think I'm more scared than you are," said Norman as Ali came to rest.

"Nothing to be scared about," said the fighter. "It's just another day in the dramatic life of Muhammad Ali. Just one more workout in the gym to me." He turned to Plimpton and added, "I'm afraid of horror films and thunderstorms. Jet planes shake me up. But there is no need to be afraid of anything you can control with your skill. That is why Allah is the only One who terrifies me. Allah is the only One of whom the meeting is independent of your will. He is One, and has no associates." Ali's voice was building in volume and piety. As though to protect himself against too much strength being discharged into a sermon, he went on quietly, "There's nothing to be scared of. Elijah Muhammad has been through things that make this night nothing. And in a small way, I have been through such things. Getting

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into the ring with Liston the first time beats anything George Foreman ever had to do, or I have had to do again. Except for living with threats against my life after the death of Malcolm X. Real death threats. No, I have no fear of tonight." He darted away from the writers as if his minute in the corner was up and shadowboxed some more, teasing a few friends with quick lancing shots that once more stopped an inch from their eyes. As he went by Hassan, the fat little Turk, he extended his long thumb and long forefinger to pinch him in the ass.

Yet for all this fine effort, the mood of the room hardly improved. It was like a corner in a hospital where relatives wait for word of the operation. Now Ali stopped dancing and took out the robe he would wear into the ring and put it on. It was a long white silk robe with an intricate black pattern, and his first comment was, "It's a real African robe." He said this to Bundini, who gave him the full look of a child just denied a reward which has been promised for a week.

"All right," Ali said at last. "Let's see your robe."

Now Bundini displayed the garment which he had brought for Ali to wear. It was also white but had green, red and black piping along its edges, the national colors of Zaïre. A green, red, and black map of the country was stitched over the heart. Bundini wore a white jacket of the same material and decoration. Ali tried on Bundini's robe, looked in the mirror, took it off, handed it back. He put on the first robe again. "This one's more beautiful," he said. "It's really prettier than the one you brought. Take a look in the mirror, Drew, it's really better." It was. Bundini's robe looked a suspicion shopworn.

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But Bundini did not look in the mirror. Instead he fixed his look on Ali. He glared at him. For a full minute they scalded one another's eyes. *Look!* said Bundini's expression, *don't mess with the wisdom of your man. I brought a robe which matches my jacket. Your strength and my strength are linked. Weaken me, and you weaken yourself. Wear the colors I have chosen.* Something of that strength had to be in his eyes. Some unspoken threat as well, doubtless, for Ali suddenly slapped him, sharp as the crack of a rifle. "Don't you ever dare do that again," he cried out at Bundini. "Now take a look at me in the mirror," Ali commanded. But Bundini refused to look. Ali slapped him again.

The second slap was so ritual that one had to wonder if something like this was a well-worked ceremony, even an exorcism. It was hard to tell. Bundini seemed too furious to speak. His expression clearly said: *Beat me to death, but I will not look in the mirror. The robe you describe as beautiful is not the one.* Ali finally walked away from him.

It was time to decide on the trunks. He tried several. One pair was all white with no decoration at all, as pure and silver a white as the priestly robes of Islam. "Take this one, Ali," his brother Rachman cried, "take this white one, it's nice, Ali, take it." But Ali after much deliberation before the mirror decided to wear white trunks with a vertical black stripe (and indeed in the photographs one would see later of the fight, there is the black stripe articulating each movement from his torso down to his legs).

Now Ali sat on a rubbing table near the middle of the room, and put on his long white boxing shoes and held each foot in the air while Dundee scraped the soles with a knife to roughen them. The fighter took a comb someone

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handed him, the Y-shaped comb with steel teeth that Blacks use for an Afro, and worked with deliberation on his hair while his shoes were being scraped. At a signal of his finger, somebody brought him a magazine, a Zaïre periodical in French which gave the complete list of Foreman's fights and Ali's. He read the names aloud to Plimpton and Mailer, and once again contrasted the number of nobodies Foreman had fought with the number of notables he had met. It was as if he had to take still one more look at the marrow of his life. For the first time in all these months, he seemed to want to offer a public showing of the fear which must come to him in a dream. He began to chatter as though no one were in the room and he were talking in his sleep, "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee, you can't hit what you can't see," he repeated several times as though the words were long gone, and then he murmured, "I been up and I been down. You know, I been around." He shook his head. "It must be dark when you get knocked out," he said, contemplating the ogre of midnight. "Why, I never been knocked out," he said. "I been knocked down, but never out." Like a dreamer awakening to the knowledge that the dream is only a net above one's death, he cried out, "That's *strange* . . . being stopped." Again, he shook his head. "Yeah," he said, "that's a bad feeling waiting for night to choke up on you," and he looked at the two writers with the blank eyes of a patient who has encountered some reality in the coils of his condition no doctor will ever comprehend.

Then he must have come to the end of this confrontation with feelings that moved in on him like fog, for he used a phrase he had not employed in months, not since he had

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last given great woe to every high official in Zaïre, "Yes," he said to the room at large, "let's get ready for the rumble in the jungle," and he began to call to people across the room.

"Hey, Bundini," he cried out, "are we gonna dance?"

But Bundini did not reply. A sorrow was in the room.

"Does anybody hear me?" cried Ali. "Are we going to the dance?"

"We're going to dance and dance," said Gene Kilroy sadly.

"We're going to dance," said Ali, "We're going to da-ance."

~~Ali~~ Dundee came up to tape his hands. The observer from Foreman's dressing room, Doc Broadus, now moved up to study the operation. ~~He was a short sturdy black man in his~~

~~sixty who had discovered Foreman years ago in the job Corps and had been with George for much of his career ever since. Broadus was well known around the Inter-Continental for his prophetic dreams. In his sleep, he had picked the knockout round for both the Frazier and Norton fights. Now for Ali, he had also had a dream that George would win in two rounds, but this time he wasn't making the prediction for certain. There had been some flaw in the dream.~~

~~Ali devoted time to talking to him, as if the most valuable man in the room might be Doc Broadus, who could bring back words of Foreman of every detail in his last minute condition.~~

Ali stared at him hard, and Broadus shifted his feet. He was shy with Ali. Maybe he had admired his career for too many years to be able to confront him easily now.

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"Tell your man," Ali said confidentially, "he better get ready to dance."

Again, Broadus shifted uncomfortably.

~~At this moment, Ferdie Pacheco came bursting back into the dressing room. He was in a state. "I can't get in to see Foreman," he said to Broadus. "What the hell is going on? What is this?" he said in a tone of fear and considerable shock, "we're boxing tonight, not fighting World War Three!" He seemed disturbed by the fury of the other dressing room. Broadus got up quickly and went out with him.~~

Now Ali started talking to Bundini. "Say, Bundini, we gonna dance?" he asked. Bundini would not reply.

"I said, are we going to dance?"

Silence.

"Drew, why don't you speak to me?" Ali said in a big voice as if exaggeration were the best means to take Bundini out of his mood. "Bundini, ain't we going to dance?" he asked again, and in a droll tender voice, added, "You know I can't dance without Bundini."

"You turned down my robe," Bundini said in his deepest, huskiest and most emotional voice.

"Oh man," said Ali, "I'm the Champ. You got to allow me to do something on my own. You got to give me the right to pick my robe or how will I ever be Champ again? You going to tell me what to eat? You going to tell me how to go? Bundini, I am blue. I never seen a time like this when *you* don't cheer me up."

Bundini fought it, but a smile began to tickle his lips.

"Bundini, are we going to dance?" asked Ali.

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"All night long," said Bundini.

"Yes, we're going to dance," said Ali, "we're going to dance and dance."

~~Broadus was back from the job of getting Foreman admitted to Foreman's dressing room, and Ali began to perform for him again.~~ "What are we going to do?" he asked of Bundini and Dundee and Kilroy. "We're going to dance," said Gene Kilroy with a sad loving smile, "we're going to dance all night long."

"Yes, we're going to da-ance," cried Ali, and said again to Broadus, "You tell him to get ready."

"I'm not telling him nothing," muttered Broadus.

"Tell him he better know how to dance."

"He don't dance," Broadus managed to say as if to warn: My man has heavier things to do.

"He don't what?" asked Ali.

"He don't dance," said Broadus.

"George Foreman's man," cried Ali, "says George can't dance. George can't come to the da-ance!"

"Five minutes," somebody yelled out, and Youngblood handed the fighter a bottle of orange juice. Ali took a swig of it, half a glass worth, and stared with amusement at Broadus. "Tell him to hit me in the belly," he said.

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mad. While he shadowboxed, his manager continued to pray.

"How are things with Foreman?" someone asked Pacheco, and he shrugged. "Foreman's not talking," he said. "They got him covered with towels."

Now the word came down the line from the stadium outside. "Ali in the ring, Ali in the ring."

Solemnly, Bundini handed Ali the white African robe which the fighter had selected. Then everybody in the dressing room was on their way, a long file of twenty men who pushed and were hustled through a platoon of soldiers standing outside the door and then in a gang's rush in a full company of other soldiers were racing through the gray cement-brick corridors with their long-gone echoes of rifle shots and death. They emerged into open air, into the surrealistic bliss and green air of stadium grass under electric lights, and a cheer of no vast volume went up at the sight of Ali, but then the crowd had been waiting through an empty hour with no semifinal to watch, just an empty ring, and hours gone by before that with dancers to watch, more dancers, then more tribal dancers, a long count of the minutes from midnight to four. The nation of Zaïre had been awaiting this event for three months, now they were here, some sixty thousand, in a great oval of seats far from that ring in the center of the soccer field. They must be disappointed. Watching the fighters would prove kin to sitting in a room in a housing project studying people through a window in another housing project on the other side of a twelve-lane freeway. The fighters would work under a big corrugated tin shed roof with girders to protect the ring

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and the twenty-five hundred ringside seats from tropical downpour, which might come at any minute on this night so advanced already into the rainy season. Heavy rains were overdue by two weeks and more. Light rain had come almost every afternoon and dark portentous skies hung overhead. In America that would speak of quick summer storms, but the clouds in Africa were patient as the people and a black whirling smoky sky could shift overhead for days before more than a drop would fall.

Something of the weight of this oncoming rain was in the air. The early night had been full of oppression, and it was hot for so early in the morning, eighty degrees and a little more. Thoughts, however, of the oncoming fight left Norman closer to feeling chill. He was sitting next to Plimpton in the second row from the ring, a seat worth traveling thousands of miles to obtain (although counting two round trips, the figure might yet be twenty-five thousand miles — a barrel of jet lag for the soul). In front of them was a row of wire service reporters and photographers leaning on the apron of the ring; inside the ropes was Ali checking the resin against his shoes, and offering flashes of his shuffle to the study of the crowd, whirling away once in a while to throw a kaleidoscope-dozen of punches at the air in two seconds no more — one-Mississippi, two-Mississippi — twelve punches had gone by. Screams from the crowd at the blur of the gloves. He was all alone in the ring, the Challenger on call for the Champion, the Prince waiting for the Pretender, and unlike other fighters who wilt in the long minutes before the titleholder will appear, Ali seemed to be taking royal pleasure in his undisputed posses-

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sion of the space. He looked unafraid and almost on the edge of happiness, as if the discipline of having carried himself through the two thousand nights of sleeping without his title after it had been taken from him without ever losing a contest — a frustration for a fighter doubtless equal in impact to writing *A Farewell to Arms* and then not being able to publish it — must have been a biblical seven years of trial through which he had come with the crucial part of his honor, his talent, and his desire for greatness still intact, and light came off him at this instant. His body had a shine like the flanks of a thoroughbred. He looked fully ready to fight the strongest meanest man to come along in Heavy-weight circles in many years, maybe the worst big man of all, and while the Prince stood alone in his ring, and waited out the minutes for the Champion to arrive and had his thoughts, whatever they were, and his private communion with Allah, however that might feel, while he stood and while he shuffled and while he shadowboxed the air, the Lord Privy Seal, Angelo Dundee from Miami, went methodically from ring post to ring post and there in full view of ringside and the stadium just as methodically loosened each of the four turnbuckles on each post which held the tension of each of the four ropes, and did it with a spoke and a wrench he must have put in his little carrying bag back at Nsele and transported on the bus and carried from the dressing room to this ring. And when the ropes were slack to his taste, loose enough for his fighter to lean way back, he left the ring and returned to the corner. Nobody had paid any particular attention to him.

Foreman was still in his dressing room. Later Plimpton

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learned a detail from his old friend Archie Moore. "Just before going out to the ring, Foreman joined hands with his boxing trust — Dick Sadler, Sandy Saddler, and Archie — in a sort of prayer ritual they had practiced (for every fight) since Foreman became Champion in Jamaica," Plimpton wrote. "Now they were holding hands again in Zaïre, and Archie Moore, who had his head bowed, found himself thinking that he should pray for Muhammad Ali's safety. Here's what he said: 'I was praying, and in great sincerity, that George wouldn't *kill* Ali. I really felt that was a possibility.'" So did others.

Foreman arrived in the ring. He was wearing red velvet trunks with a white stripe and a blue waistband. The colors of the American flag girded his middle and his shoes were white. He looked solemn, even sheepish, like a big boy who as Archie said "truly doesn't know his own strength." The letters GF stood out in embossed white cloth from the red velvet of his trunks. GF — Great Fighter.

The Referee, Zack Clayton, Black and much respected in his profession, had been waiting. George had time to reach his corner, shuffle his feet, huddle with the trust, get the soles of his shoes in resin, and the fighters were meeting in the center of the ring to get instructions. It was the time for each man to extort a measure of fear from the other. Liston had done it to all his opponents until he met Ali who, then Cassius Clay at the age of twenty-two, glared back at him with all the imperative of his high-destiny guts. Foreman, in turn, had done it to Frazier and then to Norton. A big look, heavy as death, oppressive as the closing of the door of one's tomb.

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To Foreman, Ali now said (as everybody was later informed), "You have heard of me since you were young. You've been following me since you were a little boy. Now, you must meet me, your master!" — words the press could not hear at the time, but Ali's mouth was moving, his head was twelve inches from Foreman's, his eyes were on the other. Foreman blinked, Foreman looked surprised as if he had been impressed just a little more than he expected. He tapped Ali's glove in a move equal to saying, "That's *your* round. Now *we* start."

The fighters went back to their corners. Ali pressed his elbows to his side, closed his eyes and offered a prayer. Foreman turned his back. In the thirty seconds before the fight began, he grasped the ropes in his corner and bent over from the waist so that his big and powerful buttocks were presented to Ali. He flexed in this position so long it took on a kind of derision as though to declare: "My farts to you." He was still in such a pose when the bell rang.

The bell! Through a long unheard sigh of collective release, Ali charged across the ring. He looked as big and determined as Foreman, so he held himself, as if *he* possessed the true threat. They collided without meeting, their bodies still five feet apart. Each veered backward like similar magnetic poles repelling one another forcibly. Then Ali came forward again, Foreman came forward, they circled, they feinted, they moved in an electric ring, and Ali threw the first punch, a tentative left. It came up short. Then he drove a lightning-strong right straight as a pole into the stunned center of Foreman's head, the unmistakable thwomp of a high-powered punch. A cry went up.

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Whatever else happened, Foreman had been hit. No opponent had cracked George this hard in years and no sparring partner had dared to.

Foreman charged in rage. Ali compounded the insult. He grabbed the Champion around the neck and pushed his head down, wrestled it down crudely and decisively to show Foreman he was considerably rougher than anybody warned, and relations had commenced. They circled again. They feinted. They started in on one another and drew back. It was as if each held a gun. If one fired and missed, the other was certain to hit. If you threw a punch, and your opponent was ready, your own head would take his punch. What a shock. It is like seizing a high-voltage line. Suddenly you are on the floor.

Ali was not dancing. Rather he was bouncing from side to side looking for an opportunity to attack. So was Foreman. Maybe fifteen seconds went by. Suddenly Ali hit him again. It was again a right hand. Again it was hard. The sound of a bat thunking into a watermelon was heard around the ring. Once more Foreman charged after the blow, and once more Ali took him around the neck with his right arm, then stuck his left glove in Foreman's right armpit. Foreman could not start to swing. It was a nimble part of the advanced course for tying up a fighter. The referee broke the clinch. Again they moved through invisible reaches of attraction and repulsion, darting forward, sliding to the side, cocking their heads, each trying to strike an itch to panic in the other, two big men fast as pumas, charged as tigers — unseen sparks came off their moves. Ali hit him again, straight left, then a straight right. Foreman responded

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like a bull. He roared forward. A dangerous bull. His gloves were out like horns. No room for Ali to dance to the side, stick him and move, hit him and move. Ali went back, feinted, went back again, was on the ropes. Foreman had cut him off. The fight was thirty seconds old, and Foreman had driven him to the ropes. Ali had not even tried to get around those outstretched gloves so ready to cuff him, rough him, break his grace, no, retreating, Ali collected his toll. He hit Foreman with another left and another right.

Still a wail went up from the crowd. They saw Ali on the ropes. Who had talked of anything but how long Ali could keep away? Now he was trapped, so soon. Yet Foreman was off his aim. Ali's last left and right had checked him. Foreman's punches were not ready and Ali parried, Ali blocked. They clinched. The referee broke it. Ali was off the ropes with ease.

To celebrate, he hit Foreman another straight right. Up and down the press rows, one exclamation was leaping, "He's hitting him with *rights*." Ali had not punched with such authority in seven years. Champions do not hit other champions with right-hand leads. Not in the first round. It is the most difficult and dangerous punch. Difficult to deliver and dangerous to oneself. In nearly all positions, the right hand has longer to travel, a foot more at least than the left. Boxers deal with inches and half-inches. In the time it takes a right hand to travel that extra space, alarms are ringing in the opponent, counterattacks are beginning. He will duck under the right and take off your head with a left. So good fighters do not often lead with their right against another good fighter. Not in the first round. They

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wait. They keep the right hand. It is one's authority, and ready to punish a left which comes too slowly. One throws one's right over a jab; one can block the left hook with a right forearm and chop back a right in return. Classic maxims of boxing. All fight writers know them. Off these principles they take their interpretation. They are good engineers at Indianapolis but Ali is on his way to the moon. Right-hand leads! My God!

In the next minute, Ali proceeded to hit Foreman with a combination rare as plutonium: a straight right hand followed by a long left hook. Spring-zing! went those punches, bolt to the head, bolt to the head; each time Foreman would rush forward in murderous rage and be caught by the neck and turned. His menace became more impressive each time he was struck. If the punches maddened him, they did not weaken him. Another fighter would be staggering by now. Foreman merely looked more destructive. His hands lost no speed, his hands looked as fast as Ali's (except when he got hit) and his face was developing a murderous appetite. He had not been treated so disrespectfully in years. Lost was genial George of the press conferences. His life was clear. He was going to dismember Ali. As he kept getting hit and grabbed, hit and grabbed, a new fear came over the rows at ringside. Foreman was awesome. Ali had now hit him about fifteen good punches to the head and not been caught once in return. What would happen when Foreman finally hit Ali? No Heavyweight could keep up the speed of these moves, not for fourteen more rounds.

But then the first was not even over. In the last minute, Foreman forced Ali to the ropes, was in on him, broke loose,

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and smashed a right uppercut through Ali's gloves, then another. The second went like a spear through the top of Ali's skull. His eyes flew up in consternation, and he grabbed Foreman's right arm with his left, squeezed it, clung to it. Foreman, his arm being held, was still in a mood to throw the good right again, and did. Four heavy half-smothered rights, concussive as blows to the heavy bag, went up to the head, then two down to the body, whaling on Ali even as he was held, and it was apparent these punches hurt. Ali came off the ropes in the most determined embrace of his life, both gloves locked around the back of Foreman's neck. The whites of Ali's eyes showed the glaze of a combat soldier who has just seen a dismembered arm go flying across the sky after an explosion. What kind of monster was he encountering?

Foreman threw a wild left. Then a left, a right, a left, a left and a right. Some to the head, some to the body, some got blocked, some missed, one collided with Ali's floating ribs, brutal punches, jarring and imprecise as a collision at slow speed in a truck.

With everybody screaming, Ali now hit Foreman with a right. Foreman hit him back with a left and a right. Now they each landed blows. Everybody was shaking their head at the bell. What a round!

Now the press rows began to ring with comment on those right-hand leads. [How does Ali dare? A magnificent round. Norman has few vanities left, but thinks he knows something about boxing. He is ready to serve as engineer on Ali's trip to the moon. For Ali is one artist who does not box by right counter to left hook. He fights the entirety of

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the other person. He lives in fields of concentration where he can detect the smallest flicker of lack of concentration. Foreman has shown himself a lack of quiver flat to the possibility of a right. Who before this had dared after all to hit Foreman with a right? Of late his opponents were afraid to flick him with a jab. Fast were Foreman's hands, but held a flat spot of complacency before the right. He was not ready for a man to come into the ring unafraid of him. That offered its beauty. But frightening. Ali cannot fight every round like this. Such a pace will kill him in five. Indeed he could be worried as he sits in the corner. It has been his round, but what a force to Foreman's punches. It is true. Foreman hits harder than other fighters. And takes a very good punch. Ali looks thoughtful.

There is a sound box in the vicinity, some small loud speaker hooked into the closed circuit, and on it Norman can hear David Frost, Jim Brown, and Joe Frazier talking between rounds, an agreeable sense of detachment thereby offered for they are on the other side of the press rows. Listening to them offers the comfort of a man watching a snowstorm from his fireplace. Jim Brown may have said last night that Ali had no chance, but Brown is one athlete who will report what he sees. "Great round for Muhammad Ali," he comments. "He did a fantastic job, although I don't think he can keep up this pace."

Sullenly, Joe Frazier disagrees. "Round was even . . . very close."

David Frost: "You wouldn't call that round for Ali?"

Joe is not there to root Ali home, not after Ali called him ignorant. "It was very close. Ali had two or three good

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riding with the somewhat stifled punches Foreman kept throwing. Foreman had begun to dominate the action to the point where Ali's best course seemed to be obliged to take what was left of each punch after the attempt to smother it. He kept trying to wrestle Foreman to a stop.

But then Ali must have come to a first assessment of assets and weaknesses, for he made ~~some~~ somewhere in the unremarked middle of the ~~second~~ round ⁵ - he ^{Ali} must have made a decision on how to shape the rest of the fight. He did not seem able to hurt Foreman critically with those right-hand leads. Nor was he stronger than Foreman except when wrestling on his neck, and certainly he could not afford any more of those episodes where he held onto Foreman even as George was hitting him. It was costly in points, painful, and won nothing. On the other hand, it was too soon to dance. Too rapid would be the drain on his stamina. So the time had come to see if he could outbox Foreman while lying on the ropes. It had been his option from the beginning and it was the most dangerous option he had. For so long as Foreman had strength, the ropes would prove about as safe as riding a unicycle on a parapet. Still what is genius but balance on the edge of the impossible? Ali introduced his grand theme. He lay back on the ropes in the middle of the second round, and from that position he would work for the rest of the fight, reclining at an angle of ten and twenty degrees from the vertical and sometimes even further, a cramped near-tortured angle from which to box.

Of course Ali had been preparing for just this hour over the last ten years. For ten years he had been practicing to

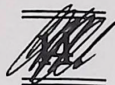
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fight powerful sluggers who beat on your belly while you lay on the ropes. So he took up his station with confidence, shoulders parallel to the edge of the ring. In this posture his right would have no more impact than a straight left but he could find himself in position to cover his head with both gloves, and his belly with his elbows, he could rock and sway, lean so far back Foreman must fall on him. Should Foreman pause from the fatigue of throwing punches, Ali could bounce off the ropes and sting him, jolt him, make him look clumsy, mock him, rouse his anger, which might yet wear Foreman out more than anything else. In this position, Ali could even hurt him. A jab hurts if you run into it, and Foreman is always coming in. Still, Ali is in the position of a man bowing and ducking in a doorway while another man comes at him with two clubs. Foreman comes on with his two clubs. In the first exchange he hits Ali about six times while Ali is returning only one blow. Yet the punches to Ali's head seem not to bother him; he is swallowing the impact with his entire body. He is like a spring on the ropes. Blows seem to pass through him as if he is indeed a leaf spring built to take shock. None of his spirit is congested in his joints. Encouraged by the recognition that he can live with these blows, he begins to taunt Foreman. "Can you hit?" he calls out. "You can't hit. You push!" Since his head has been in range of Foreman's gloves, Foreman lunges at him. Back goes Ali's head like the carnival boy ducking baseballs. Wham to you, goes Ali, catapulting back. Bing and sting! Now Foreman is missing and Ali is hitting.

It is becoming a way to fight and even a way to live, but

RIGHT-HAND LEADS

for Ali's corner it is a terror to watch. In the last thirty seconds of this second round, Ali hits out with straight rights from the ropes fast as jabs. Foreman's head must feel like a rivet under a riveting gun. With just a few seconds left, Foreman throws his biggest punch of the night, an express train of a left hook which leaves a spasm for the night in its passing. It has been a little too slow. Ali lets it go by in the languid unhurried fashion of Archie Moore watching a roundhouse miss his chin by a quarter of an inch. In the void of the effort, Foreman is so off-balance that Ali could throw him through the ropes. "Nothing," says Ali through his mouthpiece. "You have no aim." The bell rings and Foreman looks depressed. There has been premature desperation in that left. Ali shakes his head in derision. Of course that is one of Ali's basic tricks. All through his first fight with Frazier he kept signaling to the crowd that Joe failed to impress him. All the while Ali was finding himself in more trouble.



The Man in the Rigging

IT SEEMS LIKE eight rounds have passed yet we only finished two. Is it because we are trying to watch with the fighters' sense of time? Before fatigue brings boxers to the boiler rooms of the damned, they live at a height of consciousness and with a sense of detail they encounter nowhere else. In no other place is their intelligence so full, nor their sense of time able to contain so much of itself as in the long internal effort of the ring. Thirty minutes go by like three hours. Let us undertake the chance, then, that our description of the fight may be longer to read than the fight itself. We can assure ourselves: It was even longer for the fighters.

Contemplate them as they sit in their corners between the second and third rounds. The outcome of the fight is not yet determined. Not for either. Ali has an enormous problem equal to his enormous confidence. Everybody has wondered whether Ali can get through the first few rounds and take Foreman's punch. Now the problem has been

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refined: Can he dismantle Foreman's strength before he uses up his own wit?

Foreman has another problem; he may not be as aware of it as his corner. There is no fear in his mind that he will fail to win the fight. He does not think about that any more than a lion supposes it will be unable to destroy a cheetah; no, it is just a question of catching Ali, a maddening frustration. Still the insult to his rage has to worry his corner. They can hardly tell him not to be angry. It is Foreman's rage after all which has led him to knock out so many fighters. To cut it off is to leave him cowlike. Nonetheless he must contain his anger until he catches Ali. Otherwise he is going to wear himself out.

So Sadler works on him, rubs his breasts and belly, Sadler sends his fingers into all the places where rage has congested, into the meat of the pectorals and the muscle plating beneath Foreman's chest, Sadler's touch has all the wisdom of thirty-five years of Black fingers elucidating comforts for Black flesh, sensual are his fingers as he plucks and shapes and shakes and balms, his silver bracelet shining on his Black wrist. When Sadler feels the fighter is soothed, he begins to speak, and Foreman takes on the expression of a man whose head is working slowly. He has too much to think about. He spits into the bowl held before him and nods respectfully. He looks as if he is listening to his dentist.

In Ali's corner, Dundee, with the quiet concern of a sommelier, is bringing the mouth of the adhesive-taped water bottle to Ali's lips, and does it with a forefinger under the neck so the bottle will not pour too much as he tips it up.

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Ali rinses and spits with his eyes off on the serious calculation of a man weighing grim but necessary alternatives.

Joe Frazier: "George is pounding that body with shots. He's hurting the body. Ali shouldn't stay on that rope. . . . If he don't move or cut George, George will walk him down. He need to move. He don't need to stay on that rope. For what reason's he on the rope?" Frazier sounds offended. Even the sound of the word worries him. Joe Frazier would consider himself *gone* if he had to work there. Rope is an ugly and miserable kuntu.

Jim Brown replies: "Ali is punishing George Foreman even *though* he's on the rope. He's getting some tremendous blows in and" — the wisdom of the professional football player — "at some point that can tell"

The bell. Once more Ali comes out of the corner with a big and threatening face as if this round for certain he will bring the attack to Foreman and once again sees something wrong in the idea, profoundly wrong, shifts his plan instantly, backs up and begins to play the ropes. On comes Foreman. The fight has taken its formal pattern. Ali will go by choice to the ropes and Foreman will chase him. Now in each round Ali will work for thirty or forty seconds or for so much even as a minute with his back no more than a foot or two from the top rope, and he is on the rope as often as not. When the strength of the mood, or the logic of the clinch suggests that the virtue of one set of ropes has been used up, he will back off across the ring to use another set. He will spend on an average one-quarter of each round on each of the four sides of the ring. He might just as well be drawing conscious strength from the burial gods of the

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North, the West, the East and the South. Never has a major fight been so locked into one pattern of movement. It appears designed by a choreographer who knows nothing about the workings of legs and is endlessly inventive about arms. The fight goes on in exactly this fashion round after round, and yet it is hardly boring, for Ali appears in constant danger, and is, and is not. He is turning the pockets of the boxing world inside out. He is demonstrating that what for other fighters is a weakness can be for him a strength. Foreman has been trained to cut instinctively from side to side in such a way as to spoil Ali's ability to circle, Foreman has learned how to force retreat to the ropes. But Ali makes no effort to get away. He does not circle, neither does he reverse his circle. Instead he backs up. Foreman's outstretched arms become a liability. Unable to cuff at a dancing target, he must probe forward. As he does, Ali keeps popping him with straight lefts and rights fast as karate strokes. ~~But then Ali's wife has a black belt in karate.~~

Sooner or later, however, Foreman is always on him, leaning on him, banging him, belting away with all the fury George knows how to bring to the heavy bag. Ali uses the ropes to absorb the bludgeoning. Standing on one's feet, it is painful to absorb a heavy body punch even when blocked with one's arms. The torso, the legs and the spine take the shock. One has to absorb the brunt of the punch. Leaning on the ropes, however, Ali can pass it along; the ropes will receive the strain. If he cannot catch Foreman's punches with his gloves, or deflect them, or bend Foreman's shoulder to spoil his move, or lean away with his head,

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slip to the side, or loom up to hug Foreman's head, if finally there is nothing to do but take the punch, then Ali tightens his body and conducts the shock out along the ropes, so that Foreman must feel as if he is beating on a tree trunk which is oscillating against ropes. Foreman's power seems to travel right down the line and rattle the ring posts. It fortifies Ali's sense of relaxation—he has always the last resort of composing himself for the punch. When, occasionally, a blow does hurt, he sticks Foreman back, mean and salty, using his left and right as jabs. Since his shoulders are against the ropes, he jabs as often with his right as his left. With his timing it is a great jab. He has a gift for hitting Foreman as Foreman comes in. That doubles or triples the force. Besides he is using so many right jabs Foreman must start to wonder whether he is fighting a southpaw. Then comes the left jab again. A converted southpaw? It has something of the shift of locus which comes from making love to a brunette when she is wearing a blond wig. Of course, Ali has red wigs too. At the end of the round, Ali hits Foreman with some of the hardest punches of the fight. A right, a left, and a right startle Foreman in their combination. He may not have seen such a combination since his last street fight. Ali gives a look of contempt and they wrestle for a few seconds until the bell. For the few extra seconds it takes Foreman to go to his corner, his legs have the look of a bedridden man who has started on a tour of his room for the first time in a week. He has almost stumbled on the way to his stool.

~~In the aisle, Rachman Ali began to jeer at Henry Clark. "Your man's a chump," Rachman said. "Ali's going to get him." Clark had to look worried. It was hardly his right.~~

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First his own fight had been postponed, then called off, now he was watching George from a crate in the aisle. Since he had a big bet on George, this last round offered its woes.

In the corner Sadler was massaging Foreman's right shoulder and George was gagging a bit, the inside of his lips showing a shocking frothy white like the mouth of an galloped horse.

Nonetheless, he looked lively as he came out for the bell. He came right across the middle of the ring to show Ali a new kind of feint, a long pawing movement of his hands accompanied by short moves of his head. It was to a different rhythm as if to say, "I haven't begun to show what I know."

He looked jaunty, but he was holding his right hand down by the waist. Fatigue must have lent carelessness to what he did, for Ali immediately answered with an insulting stiff right, an accelerating hook and another right so heavy to Foreman's head that he grabbed for a clinch, first time in the fight. There, holding on to Ali while vertigo collided with nausea, and bile scalded his breath, he must have been delivered into a new awareness, for George immediately started to look better. He began to get to Ali on the ropes and hit him occasionally, and for the first time in a while was not getting hit as much himself. He was even beginning to jam a number of Ali's rhythms. Up to now, whenever Ali took a punch, he was certain to come off the ropes and hit Foreman back. A couple of times in this round, however, even as Ali started his move, George would jam his forearm into Ali's neck, or wrestle him to a standstill.

All the while Ali was talking. "Come on, George, show

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me something," he would say. "Can't you fight harder? That ain't hard. I thought you was the Champion, I thought you had punches," and Foreman working like a bricklayer running up a pyramid to set his bricks would snort and lance his arms in sudden unexpected directions and try to catch Ali bouncing on the rope, Ali who was becoming more confirmed every minute in the sinecure of the rope, but at the end of the round, Foreman caught him with the best punch he had thrown in many a minute, landing just before the bell, and as he turned to leave Ali, he said clearly, "How's that?"

It must have encouraged him, for in the fifth round he tried to knock Ali out. Even as Ali was becoming more confident on the ropes, Foreman grew convinced he could break Ali's defense. Confidence on both sides makes for war. The round would go down in history as one of the great rounds in Heavyweight boxing; indeed it was so good it forged its own frame as they battled. One could see it outlined forever in lights: *The Great Fifth Round of the Ali-Foreman fight!*

~~Like much of greatness, the beginnings were unmarked. Foreman ended the fourth round well, but expectation was circling ringside that a monumental upset could be shaping. Even Joe Frazier was admitting that George was "not being calm." It took John Daly to blurt out cheerfully to David Frost, "Ali is winning all the way for me and I think he's going to take it within another four rounds!"~~

~~Foreman didn't think so. There had been that sniff of victory in the fourth, the good punch which landed~~

THE MAN IN THE RIGGING



Foreman
"How's that?" He came out in the fifth with the conviction that if force had not prevailed against Ali up to now, more force was the answer, considerably more force than Ali had ever seen. If Foreman's face was battered to lumps and his legs were moving like wheels with a piece chipped out of the rim, if his arms were beginning to sear in the lava of exhaustion and his breath come roaring to his lungs like the blast from a bed of fire, still he was a prodigy of strength, he was *the* prodigy, he could live through states of torture and hurl his cannonade when others could not lift their arms, he had been trained for endurance even more than execution and back in Pendleton when first working for this fight had once boxed fifteen rounds with half a dozen sparring partners coming on in two-round shifts while Foreman was permitted only thirty seconds of rest between each round. He could go, he could go and go, he was tireless in the arms, yes, could knock down a forest, take it down all by himself, and he set out now to chop Ali down.

They sparred inconclusively for the first half-minute. Then the barrage began. With Ali braced on the ropes, as far back on the ropes as a deep-sea fisherman is braced back in his chair when setting the hook on a big strike, so Ali got ready and Foreman came on to blast him out. A shelling reminiscent of artillery battles in World War I began. Neither man moved more than a few feet in the next minute and a half. Across that embattled short space Foreman threw punches in barrages of four and six and eight and nine, heavy maniacal slamming punches, heavy as the boom of oaken doors, bombs to the body, bolts to the head, punching until he could not breathe, backing off

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to breathe again and come in again, bomb again, blast again, drive and steam and slam the torso in front of him, wreck him in the arms, break through those arms, get to his ribs, dig him out, dig him out, put the dynamite in the earth, lift him, punch him, punch him up to heaven, take him out, stagger him — great earthmover he must have sobbed to himself, kill this mad and bouncing goat.

And Ali, gloves to his head, elbows to his ribs, stood and swayed and was rattled and banged and shaken like a grasshopper at the top of a reed when the wind whips, and the ropes shook and swung like sheets in a storm, and Foreman would lunge with his right at Ali's chin and Ali go flying back out of reach by a half-inch, and half out of the ring, and back in to push at Foreman's elbow and hug his own ribs and sway, and sway just further, and lean back and come forward from the ropes and slide off a punch and fall back into the ropes with all the calm of a man swinging in the rigging. All the while, he used his eyes. They looked like stars, and he feinted Foreman out with his eyes, flashing white eyeballs ~~as if he did not see~~ which pulled Foreman through into ~~the trick of~~ lurching after him on a wrong move, Ali darting his expression in one direction while cocking his head in another, then staring at Foreman expression to expression, holding him in the eye, soul to soul, muntu to muntu, hugging his head, peeking through gloves, jamming his armpit, then taunting him on the edge of the ropes, then flying back as Foreman dove forward, tantalizing him, maddening him, looking for all the world as cool as if he were sparring in his bathrobe, now banishing Foreman's head with the turn of a matador

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sending away a bull after five fine passes were made, and once when he seemed to hesitate just a little too long, teasing Foreman just a little too long, something stirred in George like that across-the-arena knowledge of a bull when it is ready at last to gore the matador rather than the cloth, and like a member of a cuadrilla, somebody in Ali's corner screamed, "Careful! Careful! Careful!" and Ali flew back and just in time for as he bounced on the ropes Foreman threw six of his most powerful left hooks in a row and then a right, it was the center of his fight and the heart of his best charge, a left to the belly, a left to the head, a left to the belly, a left to the head, a left to the belly, another to the belly and Ali blocked them all, elbow for the belly, glove for the head, and the ropes flew like snakes. Ali was ready for the lefts. He was not prepared for the right that followed. Foreman hit him a powerful punch. The ringbolts screamed. Ali shouted, "Didn't hurt a bit." Was it the best punch he took all night? He had to ride through ten more after that. Foreman kept flashing his muscles up out of that cup of desperation boiling in all determination, punches that came toward the end of what may have been as many as forty or fifty in a minute, any one strong enough to send water from the spine to the knees. Something may have finally begun to go from Foreman's n'golo, some departure of the essence of absolute rage, and Ali reaching over the barrage would give a prod now and again to Foreman's neck like a housewife sticking a toothpick in a cake to see if it is ready. The punches got weaker and weaker, and Ali finally came off the ropes and in the last thirty seconds of the round threw his own punches, twenty

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at least. Almost all hit. Some of the hardest punches of the night were driven in. Four rights, a left hook and a right came in one stupendous combination. One punch turned Foreman's head through ninety degrees, a right cross of glove and forearm that slammed into the side of the jaw; double contact had to be felt; once from the glove, then from the bare arm, stunning and jarring. Walls must begin to crack inside the brain. Foreman staggered and lurched and glared at Ali and got hit again, zing-bing! two more. When it was all over, Ali caught Foreman by the neck like a big brother chastising an enormous and stupid kid brother, and looked out to someone in the audience, some enemy or was it some spiteful friend who said Foreman would win, for Ali, holding George around the neck, now stuck out one long white-coated tongue. ~~On the other side of the ropes, Bundini was beaming at the bell.~~

~~"I really don't believe it," said Jim Brown. "I really don't believe it. I thought he was hurt. I thought his body was hurt. He came back. He hit Foreman with everything. And he winked at me." Did he wink or stick out his tongue?~~

~~In the aisle, Rachman was screaming at Henry Clark. "Your fighter's a chump. He's an amateur. My brother is killing him. My brother is showing him up!"~~

15.

~~The Executioner's Song~~
A Long Collapsing Two Seconds

~~So far the third act of the fight.~~ Not often was there a better end to a second act than Foreman's failure to destroy Ali on the ropes. But the last scenes would present another problem. How was the final curtain to be found? For if Foreman was exhausted, Ali was weary. He had hit Foreman harder than he had ever hit anyone. He had hit him often. Foreman's head must by now be equal to a piece of vulcanized rubber. Conceivably you could beat on him all night and nothing more would happen. There is a threshold to the knockout. When it comes close but is not crossed, then a man can stagger around the ring forever. He has received his terrible message and he is still standing. No more of the same woe can destroy him. He is like the victim in a dreadful marriage which no one knows how to end. So Ali was obliged to produce still one more surprise. If not, the unhappiest threat would present itself as he and Foreman stumbled through the remaining rounds. There is agony to elucidate even a small sense of the aesthetic out of boxing. Wanton waste for an artist like Ali to

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lose ~~then~~ the perfection of this fight by wandering down a monotonous half hour to a dreary unanimous decision.

A fine ending to the fight would live in legend, but a dull victory, anticlimactic by the end, could leave him in half a legend — overblown in reputation by his friends and contested by his enemies — precisely ~~that~~ ^{the} state ~~which~~ ^{that} afflicted most heroes. ~~Ali was fighting to prove other points. So he~~

~~said.~~ So Ali had to dispose of Foreman in the next few rounds and do it well, a formidable problem. He was like a torero after a great faena who must still face the drear potential of a protracted inept and disappointing kill. Since no pleasure is greater among athletes than to overtake the style of their opponent, Ali would look to steal Foreman's last pride. George was an executioner. ~~Ali would kill him.~~

~~But~~ But how do you execute the executioner?

The problem was revealed in all its sluggish intricacies over the next three rounds. Foreman came out for the sixth looking like an alley cat with chewed-up brows. Lumps and swellings were all over his face, his skin equal to tar that has baked in the sun. When the bell rang, however, he looked dangerous again, no longer a cat, but a bull. He lowered his head and charged across the ring. He was a total demonstration of the power of one idea even when the idea no longer works. And was immediately seized and strangled around the neck by Ali for a few valuable and pacifying seconds until Zack Clayton broke them. Afterward, Foreman moved in to throw more punches. His power, however, seemed gone. The punches were slow and tentative. They did not reach Ali. Foreman was growing glove-shy. His fastest moves were now in a nervous defense

THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG

that kept knocking Ali's punches away from his own face.

~~At this point Ali proceeded to bring out the classic left~~
jab everyone had been expecting for the first round. In the next half-minute, he struck Foreman's head with ten head-ringing jabs thrown with all the speed of a good fencer's thrust, and Foreman took them in apathy to compound the existing near-apathy of his hopes. Each time his head snapped back, some communication between his mind and his nerves must have been reduced. A surgical attack.

Yet something in Foreman's response decided Ali to give it up. Perhaps no more than his own sense of moderation. It might look absurd if he kept jabbing Foreman forever. Besides, Ali needed rest. The next two minutes turned into the slowest two minutes of the fight. Foreman kept pushing Ali to the ropes out of habit, a dogged forward motion that enabled George to rest in his fashion, the only way he still knew, which was to lean on the opponent. Ali was by now so delighted with the advantages of the ropes that he fell back on them like a man returning home in quiet triumph, yes, settled in with the weary pleasure of a working man getting back into bed after a long day to be treated to a little of God's joy by his hardworking wife. He was almost tender with Foreman's laboring advance, holding him softly and kindly by the neck. Then he stung him with right and left karate shots from the shoulder. Foreman was now so arm-weary he could begin a punch only by lurching forward until his momentum encouraged a movement of the arm. He looked like a drunk, or rather a somnambulist, in a dance marathon. It would be wise to get him through the kill without ever waking him up. While it ought to be a

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simple matter to knock him down, there might not be enough violence left in the spirit of this ring to knock him out. So the shock of finding himself on the floor could prove a stimulant. His ego might reappear: once on the floor, he was a champion in dramatic danger of losing his title — that is an unmeasurable source of energy. Ali was now taking in the reactions of Foreman's head the way a bullfighter lines up a bull before going in over the horns for the kill. He bent to his left and, still crouched, passed his body to the right under Foreman's fists, all the while studying George's head and neck and shoulders. Since Foreman charged the move, a fair conclusion was that the bull still had an access of strength too great for the kill.

~~Nonetheless, Foreman's punches were hardly more than pats. They were sufficiently weak for any man in reasonable shape to absorb them. Still, Foreman came on. Sobbing for breath, leaning, almost limping, in a pat-a-pat of feeble cuffs, he was all but lying over Ali on the ropes. Yet what a problem in the strength of his stubbornness itself. Endless powers of determination had been built out of one season of silence passing into another. The bell rang the end of the sixth. Both men gave an involuntary smile of relief.~~

~~Foreman looked ready to float as he came to his corner. Sandy Saddler could not bring himself to look at him. The~~
~~some in Foreman's corner~~
~~do this again before the fight~~

Saneff

In his corner Ali looked thoughtful, and stood up abstractedly before the bell and abstractedly led a cheer in the stadium, his arm to the sky.

THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG

The cheer stired Foreman to action. He was out of his corner and in the middle of the ring before the bell rang. Ali opened his eyes wide and stared at him in mock wonder, then in disdain as if to say, "Now you've done it. Now you're asking for it." He came out of his corner too, and the referee was pushing both men apart as the bell rang.

~~The seventh~~

Still it was a slow round, almost as slow as the sixth. Foreman had no speed, and in return Ali boxed no faster than he had to, but kept shifting more rapidly than before from one set of ropes to another. Foreman was proving too sluggish to work with. Once, in the middle of the round, Foreman staggered past Ali, and for the first time in the fight was literally nearer the ropes. It was a startling realization. Not since the first five seconds of the fight had Ali crossed the center of the ring while moving forward. For seven rounds his retreating body had been between Foreman and the ropes except for the intervals when he traveled backward from one set of ropes to another. This time, seeing Foreman on the ropes instead, Ali backed up immediately and Foreman slogged after him like an infantryman looking at the ground. Foreman's best move by now might be to stand in the center of the ring and invite Ali to come to him. If Ali refused, he would lose the luster of his performance, and if he did come forward it would be George's turn to look for weaknesses. While Foreman waited for Ali, he could not. Yet George must have had some unspoken fear of disaster, for he shifted methods. So he would drive, thank you very much, into the grave he would determine for himself. Of course, ~~he~~ ^{Foreman} was not wholly without hope. He still worked with the idea that one punch could catch Ali.

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And with less than a minute left, he managed to drive a left hook into Ali's belly, a blow that indeed made Ali gasp. Then Foreman racked him with a right uppercut strong enough for Ali to hold on in a clinch, no, Foreman was not going to give up. Now he leaned on Ali with one extended arm and tried to whale him with the other. He looked like he was beating a rug. Foreman had begun to show the clumsiness of a street fighter at the end of a long rumble. He was reverting. It happened to all but the most cultivated fighters toward the exhausted end of a long and terrible fight. Slowly they descended from the elegance of their best style down to the knee in the groin and the overhead punch (with a rock in the fist) of forgotten street fights.

Ali, half as tired at least, was not wasting himself. He was still graceful in every move. By the end of the round he was holding Foreman's head tenderly once more in his glove. Foreman was becoming reminiscent of the computer Hal in 2001 as his units were removed one by one, malfunctions were showing and spastic lapses. ~~All the while something of the old hands of Sadler, Saddler, and Moore inserted over those thousands of hours of training still showed in occasional moves and gestures. The weakest straps of his gloves, however, had begun to look like entreaties. Still his arms threw punches. By the end of the seventh he could hardly stand: yet he must have thrown seventy more punches. So few were able to land. Ali had restricted himself to twenty-five — half at least must have gone to target. Foreman was fighting slowly, as a momentary fighter in the Golden Gloves, slow as a man walking up~~

and
he
looked
as

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 a hill of pillows; ~~slow as he would have looked if their first round had been rerun in slow motion, that was no slower than Foreman was fighting now, and thus exposed as in a film,~~ he was reminiscent of the slow and curving motions of a linebacker coiling around a runner with his hands and arms in the slow-motion replay — the boxing had shifted from speed and impact to an intimacy of movement. Delicately Ali would cradle Foreman's head with his left before he smashed it with his right. Foreman looked ready to fall over from exhaustion. His face had the soft scrubbed look of a child who has just had a dirty face washed, but then they both had that gentle look boxers get when they are very tired and have fought each other very hard.

Back in the corner, Moore's hands were massaging Foreman's shoulders. Sandy Saddler was working on his legs. Dick Sadler was talking to him. *And two*

~~Jim Brown was saying, "This man, Muhammad Ali, is unreal." When Jim used the word, it was a compliment. Whatever was real, Jim Brown could dominate. And Frazier added his humor, "I would say right now my man is not in the lead. I got a feeling George is not going to make it."~~

~~On the aisle, Rachman was still calling out to Henry Clark. "Henry, admit it, your man is through, he's a chump, he's a street fighter. Henry, admit it. Maybe I'm not a fighter, I know I'm not as good as you, but admit it, admit it. Muhammad has whipped George."~~

~~Except he hadn't. Not yet. Two rounds had gone by. The two dullest rounds of the fight. The night was hot. Now the air would become more tropical with every round. In his~~

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corner, Ali looked to be in pain as he breathed. Was it his kidneys or his ribs? Dundee was talking to him and Ali was shaking his head in disagreement. In contrast to Foreman, his expression was keen. His eyes looked as quick as the eyes, indeed, of a squirrel. The bell rang for the eighth round.

Working slowly, deliberately, backing up still one more time, he hit Foreman carefully, spacing the punches, taking aim, six good punches, lefts and rights. It was as if he had a reserve of good punches, a numbered amount like a soldier in a siege who counts his bullets, and so each punch had to carry a predetermined portion of the work.

Foreman's legs were now hitched into an ungainly prance like a horse high-stepping along a road full of rocks. Stung for the hundredth time with a cruel blow, his response was to hurl back a left hook that proved so wild he almost catapulted through the ropes. ~~Then for an instant, his back and neck were open to Ali, who cocked a punch but did not throw it, as though to demonstrate for an instant to the world that he did not want to flaw this fight with any blow reminiscent of the thud Foreman had sent to the back of the head of Norton and Roman and Frazier. So Ali posed with that punch, then moved away. Now for the second time in the fight he had found Foreman between himself and the ropes and had done nothing.~~
~~Well, George came on the ropes and pursued Ali like a man chasing a cat. The wild punch seemed to have refreshed him by its promise that some of his power was back. If his biggest punches were missing, at least they were big. Once again he might be his own prodigy of~~

THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG

strength. Now there were flurries on the ropes which had an echo of the great bombardment in the fifth round. And still Ali taunted him, still the dialogue went on. "Fight hard," said Ali, "I thought you had some punches. You're a weak man. You're all used up." After a while, Foreman's punches were whistling less than his breath. For the eighteenth time Ali's corner was screaming, "Get off the ropes. Knock him out. Take him home!" Foreman had used up the store of force he transported from the seventh to the eighth. He pawed at Ali like an infant six feet tall waving its uncoordinated battle arm.

With twenty seconds left to the round, Ali attacked. By his own measure, by that measure of twenty years of boxing, with the knowledge of all he had learned of what could and could not be done at any instant in the ring, he chose this as the occasion and lying on the ropes, he hit Foreman with a right and left, then came off the ropes to hit him with a left and a right. Into this last right hand he put his glove and his forearm again, a head-stupefying punch that sent Foreman reeling forward. As he went by, Ali hit him on the side of the jaw with a right, and darted away from the ropes in such a way as to put Foreman next to them. For the first time in the entire fight he had cut off the ring on Foreman. Now Ali struck him a combination of punches fast as the punches of the first round, but harder and more consecutive, three capital rights in a row struck Foreman, then a left, and for an instant on Foreman's face appeared the knowledge that he was in danger and must start to look to his last protection. His opponent was attacking, and there were no ropes behind the opponent. What a disloca-

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tion: the axes of his existence were reversed! He was the man on the ropes! Then a big projectile exactly the size of a fist in a glove drove into the middle of Foreman's mind, the best punch of the startled night, the blow Ali saved for a career. Foreman's arms flew out to the side like a man with a parachute jumping out of a plane, and in this doubled-over position he tried to wander out to the center of the ring. All the while his eyes were on Ali and he looked up with no anger as if Ali, indeed, was the man he knew best in the world and would see him on his dying day. Vertigo took George Foreman and revolved him. Still bowing from the waist in this uncomprehending position, eyes on Muhammad Ali all the way, he started to tumble and topple and fall even as he did not wish to go down. His mind was held with magnets high as his championship and his body was seeking the ground. He went over like a six-foot sixty-year-old butler who has just heard tragic news, yes, fell over all of a long collapsing two seconds, down came the Champion in sections and Ali revolved with him in a close circle, hand primed to hit him one more time, and never the need, a wholly intimate escort to the floor.

The referee took Ali to a corner. He stood there, he seemed lost in thought. Now he raced his feet in a quick but restrained shuffle as if to apologize for never asking his legs to dance, and looked on while Foreman tried to rouse himself.

Like a drunk hoping to get out of bed to go to work, Foreman rolled over, Foreman started the slow head-agonizing lift of all that foundered bulk God somehow gave him and whether he heard the count or no, was on his feet

THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG

a fraction after the count of ten and whipped, for when Zack Clayton guided him with a hand at his back, he walked in docile steps to his corner and did not resist. Moore received him. Sadler received him. Later, one learned the conversation.

"Feel all right?"

"Yeah," said Foreman.

"Well, don't worry. It's history now."

"Yeah."

"You're all right," said Sadler, "the rest will take care of itself."

In the ring Ali was seized by Rachman, by Gene Kilroy, by Bundini, by a host of Black friends old, new and very new, who charged up the aisles, leaped on the apron, sprang through the ropes and jumped near to touch him. Norman said to Plimpton in a tone of wonder like a dim parent who realizes suddenly his child is indeed and indubitably married, "My God, he's Champion again!" as if one had trained oneself for years not to expect news so good as that.

In the ring Ali fainted.

It occurred suddenly and without warning and almost no one saw it. Angelo Dundee circling the ropes to shout happy words at reporters was unaware of what had happened. So were all the smiling faces. It was only the eight or ten men immediately around him who knew. Those eight or ten mouths which had just been open in celebration now turned to grimaces of horror. Bundini went from laughing to weeping in five seconds.

Why Ali fainted, nobody might ever know. Whether it

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was a warning against excessive pride in years to come — one private bolt from Allah — or whether the weakness of sudden exhaustion, who could know? Maybe it was even the spasm of a reflex he must have refined unconsciously for months — the ability to recover in seconds from total oblivion. Had he been obliged to try it out at least once on this night? He was in any case too much of a champion to allow an episode to arise, and was back on his feet before ten seconds were up. His handlers having been lifted, chastened, terrified and uplifted again, looked at him with faces of triumph and knockdown, the upturned mask of comedy and the howling mouth of tragedy next to each other in that instant in the African ring.

David Frost was crying out: "Muhammad Ali has done it. The great man has done it. This is the most joyous scene ever seen in the history of boxing. This is an incredible scene. The place is going wild. Muhammad Ali has won." And because the announcer before him had picked the count up late and was two seconds behind the referee and so counting eight when Clayton said ten, it looked on all the closed circuit screens of the world as if Foreman had gotten up before the count was done, and confusion was everywhere. How could it be other? The media would always sprout the seed of confusion. "Muhammad Ali has won. By a knockdown," said Frost in good faith. "By a knockdown."

Back in America everybody was already yelling that the fight was fixed. Yes. So was *The Night Watch* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

1974-1976

13 pages

God,
~~Christ~~, Satan, Rock and Technology

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CRITICISM (Rock) 67

In Search of the Devil

Bray

moon — they were men, you know, in terms of bravery. More than I for sure, maybe more than you, Stratton. They were men. But they had the minds of women's libbies. They were working for the team. They thought of only one thing, can't betray the team, cannot allow an alien idea to ever enter their eyeball, their nose, their mouth, their ear or their fingertips long enough to disrupt the ideological system.

STRATTON: A romantic idea is an alien idea to them.

MAILER: I don't mean a romantic idea. I mean any idea that's not in the system. You could have an antiromantic idea, they still wouldn't let it enter. They have nothing against romance.

STRATTON: Women's liberation is ultimately a team effort?

MAILER: Women's liberation is an astronaut system.

STRATTON: All right, let's talk about the music we just heard.

Truman Capote was hired by *Rolling Stone* to cover the Rolling Stones ~~concert~~ when they were here the last time to tour the States. And he finally didn't do the article because he said the Stones had no mystery for him. But there's a lot of mystery in Jagger's personality and in the personality of the group, ~~as a whole~~.

MAILER: There's something unsatisfying about Jagger. We must have listened to two hours of music. Jagger's always promising so much more than he delivers. You know, finally he's in a sinister bag — he is certainly, ~~of all~~, if we take the three, four, five ~~or~~ major rock groups in the last ten years, ~~he has been~~ the one who was the most sinister. Yet he's finally not terrifying. Maybe that's what Capote meant, I don't know.

STRATTON: Jagger himself, or his music?

MAILER: His music. I don't know anything about him. I think that the Beatles, you know, can hit eight bars in *Sgt. Pepper* that are more frightening, even though they're not sinister. The Beatles had more of a sense of powers they could summon by playing the wrong note at a given moment. It's as if they're more terrified by music than Jagger. Jagger's terribly spoiled. There's all that muttering in the background: "Oh, no God, you won't break this heart of stone."* What a threat. Beyond that constant dirge, beyond the throatiness which makes you think he's riding on the rims, through all that electric masturbation, you know, all that sound of distant musketry, every drumbeat, there's still a mountain of bullshit. It's not getting in and saying, I'm going to kill

* "Heart of Stone" by Mick Jagger and Keith Richard. © 1965, Abkco Music Co.

you, motherfucker. It's not saying, I'm here to call upon Satan. It pretends to. Some of his music I find, you know, marvelously promising. But it's irritating as hell to listen to for two hours because you keep waiting for the great payoff, and it never comes.

But again there's a kind of bullying that I've always distrusted in rock. Which is, it doesn't take big balls to have a big electric guitar and a huge amplifying system and fifty thousand American corporations that they're all sneering at, working overtime to amplify them. You know, it's a little bit like some politician that you despise saying, I represent the people. He only represents his power in his microphone and his media, his vested electronic office.

STRATTON: But let's look at the Stones in context. The Stones have stayed at the top, they're still the most interesting group playing together. They're all good musicians. Even the Beatles, as musicians, with the possible exception of George Harrison, weren't very exciting. Ringo Starr could never compare with Charlie Watts for drumming ability.

MAILER: Their drummer's incredibly good. In fact, I think their drummer's half of them. Because you've got all that caterwauling, you've got all those half-heard threats, that sense of sullen curses always riding in the background, you've got that sense of disarray, sense of mama with her nerves broken looking for her fix. You got all that. But what keeps it all together is you got this great big driving beat. That you can make anything you want. You can dream up a Third World coming through, Africa rising. There's a — the tension of the music is that one world's dissolving into a kind of marvelous — I mean, their comic gifts are superb. You really get this feeling of androgynous family, and androgynous family relations, like maybe it's never been done. All that's first-rate. ~~I'm criticizing them at, you know, what I consider the highest level.~~ But finally at the highest level, they are fucking disappointing. They depend on noise. ~~You know, we listened to them not at top high. At middle high. And they don't make it.~~

STRATTON: Take a song like "Sympathy for the Devil." You have to go a long way — Bob Dylan's probably the only other one, plus some songs from the Beatles — you have to go a long way before you get lines as interesting in rock music as, "Just as every cop is a criminal and all the sinners saints."*

MAILER: What's splendid, what's new about that? Dostoyevsky used to go into an epileptic fit he grew so bored with that notion.

STRATTON: Well, there's nothing new about it, but compared to most rock lyrics, the Stones have at least considered Dostoyevsky.

MAILER: I don't think these lyrics compare to Dylan's. I don't think they even try to — I think, in fact, I'd almost go the other way. I'd say that Jagger's lyric is interminably repetitive in order to allow for that captivating tension between the guttiness in his voice and the whine. To play that back and forth, you don't really want too good a lyric. Dylan's voice is thinner. At times I find it nasal to the point where I can do without it. There's something a little boring about a man who comes from a fine Jewish family in Minneapolis sounding like an Oklahoma Okie.

You know, Dylan is . . . not Johnny Cash. So I find that part of it a little boring. Dylan's voice is much less exciting to me than his lyrics, his lyrics are superb. Selden Rodman was the first to say this, but I think Dylan may prove to be our greatest lyric poet of this period. Like many another lyric poet, he can't necessarily read his own lyrics. With Dylan, what I think you feel is that it's the poetry that carries the song, not the singer.

With Jagger, it's the reverse. Jagger has got this marvelous sense of the day in which a family breaks up. The son throws acid in the mother's face, the mother stomps the son's nuts in, and then the fat cousin comes and says, What is everybody fighting for, let's have dinner. And they sit down, the son has no nuts left, the mother's face is scarred, but they go on and, you know, British family life continues. Jagger's got that like no one else's ever had it. ~~If he'd been a writer he would have been one of the best.~~ But that marvelous quality isn't caught in the lyrics so much as in the ensemble of everything, sound, instruments, everything.

STRATTON: And his voice.

MAILER: His voice first.

STRATTON: I don't know if you can find another rock group capable of coming up with a song like "Sympathy for the Devil."

MAILER: "Sympathy for the Devil," I felt, was arch, and much too self-conscious. I couldn't quite catch the words and that's one of the things about Jagger that's always suspect to me. When you play on the edge of the articulation of words it's because you're trying to do two things at once. I did hear him at one point wailing about the Russian Revolution — that the Devil was there at the planning of the Russian Revolution and, you know, that's news. No good Christian ever thought of that before. That, I thought, was finally on the edge of the revolting. You don't, you know, you don't infuse a bunch of dumb, spaced-out, highly

sexed working-class kids with a little historical culture while you're singing. Come on! I decided Jagger must have picked up a magazine article about the Russian Revolution the day before he wrote the words. But, you know, there's more profundity in "Eleanor Rigby" than there is in "Sympathy for the Devil."

I mean, there are a lot of vulgar plays in "Sympathy for the Devil," gay-aim for game. A lot of dull choices were made. I expected to be knocked down by "Sympathy for the Devil," and I wasn't. I think maybe it's historically significant. It may be the first song that invokes the Devil in I don't know when. You might have to go back to black masses in the Middle Ages to find a lyric that invokes the Devil. But that doesn't mean it's good any more than *The Exorcist* is. Which is to say, it's phenomenal as an index of the time. What impresses us is not how good the artist is, but that he's right at the place where people are going to react. So Jagger anticipated, just as Blatty did, that there's subterranean belief in the Devil about ready to emerge. Given any kind of encouragement, it comes charging through.

Which brings us to Satanism. The Satanism of shit at the highest level, the standard of Satan. It's his escutcheon. It's his flag. He says, You've been rejected, you've been wasted by the system, passed over, yet you are more redolent, more interesting, more sexy, more incredible, more funky, more filled with undeliverables that should have been delivered than anything they got going out there. And, for years, the Devil has fought a desperate uphill battle.

But by now, when we got those superhighways, with that gas, and the whole world's getting to look more and more like the Jersey flats, given modern life up front, the suburbs, the smell of the gas, smell of plastic in every home, carpets smell of the plastic and the kids grow up licking plastic, play with Play-Doh which has that smell between cheap perfume and deodorant; when you think of the prevalence not of death in every one of our phenomena but of the void — of the presence of void — in every aspect of successful life today, you travel first class on a plane which is an envelope presenting its concept of the void, get off that airplane into an airport which in turn presents its concept of the void or you go through a smog-filled superhighway to that city which looks like every other city — ~~Moscow, I hear, looks like Washington entering its terminal cancer~~ — you then go out for your pleasures which are not as brilliant as they were in the depths of the boredom of the Victorian period; there's no such thing as a thrill

for anyone alive any longer. You take all this, all this degradation of the void; because we all move around with a profound sense of degradation these days and under it there's the Devil calling, saying I'm shit, I'm everything that you've wasted, I'm all that rich, crazy passionate fuck guck funky possibility, I'm that other culture. And of course there's a profound desire to move over to that.

Now, in this twentieth century where our senses, our souls, are being leached out, where we're all entering a void, the horror of modern life is that there is no horror. So we begin to wonder whether selling the soul to the Devil may not be a life-giving transaction. That's the underlying terror of modern life.

End

STRATTON: The Devil has always been associated with materialism. There was always, you know, the idea of the temptation of Christ with riches and the wealth of the world.

MAILER: That doesn't deny what I was saying.

STRATTON: So isn't it conceivable that what we might have done is, collectively, sold our souls to the Devil a long time ago; say in the beginning of the nineteenth century, before the Industrial Revolution?

MAILER: If we sold our soul to the Devil centuries ago in order to prosper materially, in this twentieth century we're not happy materially. We're not gorging like Romans. We are prospering electronically. And suffering materially in all the voids and stinks of plastic and pollution.

STRATTON: And lost our karma too, sold our karma along with our soul. We've sold our opportunity for transcendence. That's why we're terminal. You see what I mean? I think that if anything the Devil is winning. I think he's winning and I think he's gloating because he has more control at this point. I think he is the prince of this world.

MAILER: That's one idea I hold. What I pose against it immediately is that the Devil is also miserable, because finally the air conditioner is not the Devil's paradise.

STRATTON: True. But there are those other alternatives we may get into in the next twenty, thirty years, you know. That when people get sick of technology and air conditioners and all the sterile dead aspects of plastic, they're going to revert more and more to Satanism and to orgies, to bloodletting and to shit, all those things —

MAILER: All right. But ask yourself: All those things you're talking about, that you just named, are they equal to technology?

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Existential Aesthetics

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happening. I believe the experience of extraordinary people in extraordinary situations is not like our ordinary realistic experience at all. For example, one of the reasons I've never written about great prizefighters in a novel is that the experience they have in the ring is, I think, considerably different from what we believe it is. More intense, more mystical, more "spooky" if you will, than anything we see on the outside. Who wants to write about a fight the way sportswriters do, or even as fighters discuss it after the fight: "I was waiting to set him up with a good right. He dropped his guard and I popped him." That's the way they talk. Only, it isn't their experience.

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ADAMS: I grant you that the characters in *An American Dream* perceive and experience reality altogether differently from us ordinary folks. Still, it seems to me that their literal reality has a metaphorical level as well, just as your literal realities nearly always turn into metaphorical ones linked to the central set of metaphors regarding the existence of God or the Devil. I've come to see them as metaphors for our moral directions, which in the absence of absolutes become existential, unknowable as good or evil.

MAILER: My metaphors explain more phenomena to me than any theology I can adopt. I was an atheist for years because I couldn't stomach the notion of the all-good, all-powerful God who calmly watched all sorts of suffering which by any extension of our human imagination could not be productive of anything, not even productive of future karma. In other words that whole waste of human possibilities of the most grinding, grim, dull sort. It seems to me that the only explanation is God is not all-powerful: He's merely doing the best He can.

STAR

ADAMS: But how literally does God exist?

~~MAILER: I believe He exists literally.~~

~~ADAMS: How?~~

MAILER: ~~It's not for me to know how or where He exists.~~ It's reasonable to assume He exists in a great many ways, in places we can comprehend and a great many where we cannot. All I'm saying is that He does not have to be all-powerful. What is there that makes Him all-powerful? He was powerful enough to have created our solar system, perhaps. And if you ask what are His limits, that might be my guess. But this is babbling. It isn't important where God's limits are. What's significant is the idea that God is not all-powerful, nor is the Devil. Rather it is that we exist as some mediating level between them. You see, this notion does restore a certain dignity to moral choice.

revel
pretty
good
go
carefully
per out

~~ADAMS: Of course, it does.~~

~~MAILER: It becomes important whether you're good or bad.~~

ADAMS: In trying to know what is good or evil aren't you in effect trying to take existentialism to its logical end, that is, to end existentialism?

MAILER: Not end it, seat it. Of all the philosophies, existentialism approaches experience with the greatest awe: it says we can't categorize experience before we've experienced it. The only way we're going to be able to discover what the truth about anything might be is to submit ourselves to the reality of the experience. At the same time, given its roots in atheistic philosophers like Sartre, existentialism has always tended toward the absurd. By way of Sartre, we are to act as if there were a purpose to things even though we know there is not. And that has become the general concept of existentialism in America. But it's not mine. I'm an existentialist who believes there is a God and a Devil at war with one another. Like Sartre in his atheism, I offer a statement of absolute certainty equally founded on the inability to verify it. Atheism is as removed from logical positivism as theology. Still, ~~I don't give a goddamn if I can verify this or not.~~ There has to be something out there beyond logical positivism. I want my brain to live. I want to adventure out on a few thoughts. The fact that I can never demonstrate them is not nearly so important to me as the fact that I may come up with an hypothesis so simple, so central, that I may be able to apply it in thousands of situations. If it begins to give me some inner coherence, if I begin to think that I know more as a result of this philosophy, why not?

ADAMS: But isn't what you've identified as existentialism, extended to its logical end, seeking to know what is finally unknowable?

MAILER: That's not my definition of existentialism. I'd say we find ourselves in an existential situation whenever we are in a situation where we cannot foretell the end. Some of these situations are grave. If you get into a skid on an icy road, at a speed that's uncomfortably high, you don't know if you're going to be able to pull your car out of it without a smack-up. That's an existential situation. When people talk about it afterward they think of that quality of time when it is slowing up. The first time people connect with marijuana — not the first or the twentieth time they smoke it, but the first time they *connect* with it — they're in an existential situation. It's not the universe they have been sitting on all the time. It's slower, more sensuous, more meaningful, more natural, but filled with awe. The light tends to have a little

of the hour of the wolf, a light close to a lavender or purple, that light you get on certain kinds of evenings, or very early on certain kinds of dawns full of foreboding. But it's — there are all kinds of situations. A woman losing her virginity is in an existential situation. Of course, part of the comedy of twentieth-century technology is that it's gotten to the point where a woman can lose her virginity without being in an existential situation for a moment. It's all exactly the way she thought it was going to be, she's been so well oriented.

ADAMS: I think that assumes that her partner is not also a virgin. . . . All right. Your basic existential situation is a situation anyone enters at any moment in time when the end result of his actions is unknown. But isn't to a larger extent your aim in all the work that you've been doing to uncover what is essentially good or evil in our natures and God's nature when that kind of thing is actually unknowable? What I was going to suggest earlier in talking about the demarcations of good and evil in *An American Dream* is that you seem to have become increasingly obsessed since that time with your inability to know what is good and what is evil.

MAILER: You say I'm obsessed, but where would be the literary proof of that? What books would show that?

ADAMS: Start with the case of Richard Nixon in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* and *St. George and the Godfather*: your inability to know or to intuit whether Nixon is basically good or basically evil; to know, in *Of a Fire on the Moon*, whether our space program will carry God's vision to the stars or the Devil's; to know in *Why Are We in Vietnam?* whether America has made a Faustian compact with the Devil or whether God is using us for evil ends; whether or not our national leaders and events win or lose us ground in this divine battle. It seems to me that you lead us to this question, with increasing desire to know the answer, in every work.

MAILER: Well, it could be said that all I'm doing is leading people back to Kierkegaard. I'd remind you I've written this several times: Kierkegaard taught us, or tried to teach us, that at that moment we're feeling most saintly, we may in fact be evil. And that moment when we think we're most evil and finally corrupt, we may, in fact, in the eyes of God, be saintly at that moment. The first value of this notion is that it strips us of that fundamental arrogance of assuming that at any given moment any of us have enough centrality, have a *seat* from which we can expound our

dogma, or measure our moral value. So we don't have the right to say Richard Nixon is: A. good; B. evil. I might have my opinion of Richard Nixon, but I don't have the right to say that man is evil, any more than I have a right to say he is good.

ADAMS: Do you have a clear notion of the good?

MAILER: No. But I have, if you will, I have and I submit to the force of this word, I have a fairly well-formed *cloud* of intuitions about the nature of the good, and, like a cloud, it has to a certain degree a structure, and yet the structure is capable of altering quickly, depending on the celestial winds blowing and the less celestial winds. A cloud changes shape quickly but it remains a cloud. It's not just simply an unformed chaos.

ADAMS: You've said that an evil person is someone who has a clear notion of the good and operates in opposition to it.

MAILER: Therefore by my own definition I'm definitely not evil.

ADAMS: All right, but are you wicked?

MAILER: Unquestionably wicked, yes.

ADAMS: By your own terms, which is not knowing what is good or evil in any situation, but upping the ante each time.

MAILER: Upping the ante, yes. I'd say I may be one of the most wicked spirits in American life today. Maybe. America may be changing faster than I am.

ADAMS: Is it fair to say that your existentialism is leading us to know the nature of good and evil?

MAILER: ADAMS: It's leading us to — well, let me take a detour. People who submit to logical positivism, and go on from there into philosophies as difficult as Wittgenstein's, will answer if you ask, "Why go through these incredible disciplines in order to verify the fact that you're able to verify the wing span of a gnat but not of an archangel?" They will answer, "Well, it isn't what we are able to verify that is interesting, so much as that we go through a discipline which enables us to think cogently. We're less likely to go in for sloppy thinking thereafter." That's the value of it. I'd say by going in for my variety of associational, metaphorical thinking (which is, of course, the exact opposite) I may be able eventually to think speculatively without feeling philosophical vertigo. You see, it doesn't take any more illogic to posit that there's a god or devil than it takes to say there is none. The latter statement is absolutely as potent an act of faith. There's a marvelous line in *Jumpers*, the play by Tom Stoppard, to that effect. I paraphrase:

1812
"Well, maybe atheism is that crutch people need to protect themselves against having to face the enormity of the existence of God." You know, once you contemplate the notion that there is God and this God may be embattled, the terror you feel is enormous.

ADAMS: It's a terror, but isn't it also paranoia?

MAILER: No. The terror is not that some force is working on you to ruin you. It's another kind of terror: It's that nothing is nailed down. That we are out there — that our lives are truly existential. That we're not going to end up well. Not necessarily. You see, there's always been this sort of passive confidence implicit in Christianity, the confidence that things are going to work out all right. One does have to die, that's true, but if one keeps one's nose reasonably clean, one is going to heaven. That gave security to everybody. The ship of state was built on that security. The ship of state was nailed down. It didn't travel the stormy seas. Rather, it was carried by the strongest pallbearers of the nation. And what's happened now is we're entering an existential period in our history where nothing is nailed down. All the American faiths, one by one, are being exploded. We lived for too long in a paranoid dream world that believed communism was the secret of all evil on earth because it was the social embodiment of the Devil.

ADAMS: That's paranoid.

MAILER: That's paranoid. But I don't believe the Devil is the secret of all evil on earth. I believe something more complicated than that. I think God might be the source of a considerable amount of evil. Because if God is embattled, He could fail to take care, much to His great woe, of people who are devoted to Him, in the same way that a general might have to surrender soldiers on a hill. And those soldiers could give up with great bitterness in their hearts.

ADAMS: You've talked about evil in one sense as God's shit, God's excrement.

MAILER: Where did I say that?

ADAMS: It comes up in "The Metaphysics of the Belly." A colleague of mine once remarked that it's but a step from scatology to eschatology and I've often thought of this remark with regard to your work. Now I'm interested in the relationship between excrement and eternity. If God's shit is evil but shit is associated with the Devil, doesn't this imply that God creates evil?

you see

MAILER: There are references in my work to the idea that shit and the Devil have an umbilical relation, but it's not my idea after all. Luther had a few notions about it.

ADAMS: As did Jonathan Swift.

MAILER: It's an idea that goes — it starts with the most primitive peoples. It goes all the way. There's a reason for it. Shit is what we reject, at least to the degree that the shit felt it deserved a better end for itself. In other words, a lot of our shit has nutrients in it, worth in it. It's just that the body couldn't take it, and so passed it out. Some of the best of the food goes out with the shit as well as some of the worst. That's what I said in "The Metaphysics of the Belly." All right. To the degree that we can loosen our imagination to assume this stuff might have a soul, after all we're beginning to discover now that plants have feelings and souls, so it may be that food, even though in a peculiar relation to life, not as alive as a plant, let's say, or as an animal, but still alive to a degree, has a mood, has a spirit, has something. If food feels it has been violated, suppose it can die with a curse. Of course, the

~~Devil loves to be around and pick up those who die with a curse.~~
Malcolm Muggeridge once had Mother Theresa of Calcutta on a television show with him. Muggeridge, who is by any measure a devoutly religious man, had just written a book about Mother Theresa and obviously revered her. He told me what she used to do in Calcutta. Her order of nuns would take people who were dying on the street and move them into her convent where they'd die anyway a few days later — they didn't begin to have medicine to take care of them or anything like that — but her notion was, and Muggeridge was moved by this, and I agree that it is a moving idea, was that she didn't want them to die with absolutely nothing. She wanted them to be able to come in and get a little attention before they died so they wouldn't go out with a complete bitterness in their hearts. Now that is a religious woman. The recognition that one not die with a curse is fundamental to any inquiry into what could be the possible nature of God and the Devil. If God is embattled, and can't give fair justice to all, then what of those who do not achieve what they saw as their own fulfillment and thereby become spiritual material for the Devil, if not in this life then in another? We haven't said one word about karma, but my first idea these days is that any attempt to speak of these things makes no sense unless you take into account the peculiar calculus of karma. We may have to recognize that we're not only acting for this life but for other lives. Our past lives and our

future lives. Paying dues, receiving awards. Reducing the cost of future dues, for example, by certain acts of abnegation that make no sense to us or our friends, yet ready to dare, on the other hand, sometimes desperate activities because we *are* desperate. The condition in which we live is hurting our karma.

ADAMS: Karma is a word you've used increasingly in the last few years. ~~It's a term that you did not use in "The Metaphysics of the Belly" or "The Political Economy of Time," but which you could have in describing the nature of the soul.~~ Is this something new in your metaphysics or is it a term for something that you've already described, ~~like the way in which the soul exists, in "The Political Economy of Time"?~~

MAILER: I had come across the word in books but never paid any attention. In about 1953, I think it was in Robinson, Illinois, I went out to visit James Jones in his writers' colony and he and Lowney Handy were talking about karma and I said, "What's all that?" So he gave me the standard explanation which is that we are not only reincarnated, but the way in which we are is the reflection, the judgment, the truth, of how we lived our previous life. If you exist in a simple form of karma with no interference by Gods or Devils, a natural flux of karma, then to the degree you lived a life that was artful, your reincarnation was artful. To the degree you lived a life that destroyed the time of others and dredged up all the swamp muds, so you are a creature of the swamp in your next life. The beauty of this may be that there is now good purpose to the swamp. (This isn't Jones's talk any longer, just a more general explanation of karma.) At any rate, Jones went on about it and I said, "You *believe* in that?" Because I was an atheist and a socialist in those days. He said, "Oh, sure. That's the only thing that makes sense." Well, the line rang in my head for years. "The only thing that makes sense." I thought about it over and over and in the last three or four years I began to think, "Yes, that does make sense. Jones was right."

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those easy, quick psychological containers he can pour his characters into. I don't think he got any real insight into those two characters, the murderers in *In Cold Blood*.

MAILER: Well, Truman's abilities, I think, lie in another direction. Truman's always had an exquisite sense of his readership. Which I must say has changed greatly during his career. He started with a special readership. And moved out to an enormously large one. But he's always had this exceptional sense of how much they can bear. And he has always had the accompanying sense of how to vibrate their prejudices without shaking them apart.

STRATTON: And he knows how to end a book just beautifully, the way he ended *In Cold Blood* with that young lady visiting the grave of her murdered friend.

MAILER: Truman's never without his tone. And it would be part of his virtuosity that the elegiac tone would belong naturally to him. Yes. It would be hard to think of Truman ending a book badly. The first time Truman does, I will have to sit down and read that book all over again because it's possible that Truman will have just written far and away his most adventurous book.

STRATTON: Because he's on to something?

MAILER: The only reason Truman couldn't end a book fantastically well is because he would be on to something large. So, I agree with you about *In Cold Blood* in the sense that I don't think he got near his characters. I think that what he did do, which makes it an important book to me, is end up telling us more about the prejudices and the limited ability of the middle-class reader to encounter criminality than any book I ever read. It tells you almost nothing about the criminals, but how much it does say about that sense of everything-in-its-place that *The New Yorker* has stood for for over forty embattled years.

STRATTON: Perhaps Manson and people who can live with these extremities in their personalities may in fact be the survivors. And all the highly civilized people may be ending up in the worst kind of deaths to themselves. And technological destruction. If it's only in extremes that the society will save itself, then the secret fear of most people is that they're dead ... moribund ... and these Manson people are more alive than they are.

MAILER: Yes, I think that's what they do fear. And I think the reason we have all grown up in a society that's relatively new in its fundamental premise, a society that claims to believe in life. To coin a piece of jargon, of the worst sort, we could say that we exist in a keep-everybody-alive society. Ironically, most of the cultures

to exhibit great energy in history, the societies which produced our society, were, on the contrary, built on killing.

The idea common to all animals, and prehistoric and primitive man, even among civilized societies like the Greeks, the Romans, during the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, the idea was still that if you didn't have enough right to live — in other words, if you were a drag upon the mood and the energy and the sustenance of other people — you were better off — Christ to the contrary — dead. These societies were kill societies. They got their neatness, their elegance, they got their style — out of killing.

But we are a society which says in effect, "Be sure you live. Life is our only gift. We're not going to get anything after this." The kill societies, to the contrary, were religious. They believed in the immanence of God, or a devil, or in demons. Primitive man spent his time placating demons in every tree. If a wind blew a sudden leaf past his face, he began to propitiate some spirit. They believed nothing was accidental. They were, in fact, more scientific than we are, for they believed that anything you can't explain is tremendously disturbing, whereas we prefer to ignore whatever we cannot dominate with our minds. We wipe out the artifacts of the past as if they have no curse.

Well, this notion, this keep-everybody-alive society — is a vulgar notion. There's nothing more livid, more cancer-provoking, than the face of a distorted liberal who shrieks at you, "You're talking about a human being!" They always italicize — *hu-min*. You're talking about a *life* that can be *lost*, they say. They're the same people who will turn around and absolutely insist upon destroying life, the same people who will soon leap with glee to forbid people to procreate, that is, about the time we decide there are definitely too many people on earth and we have to cut down the population or we won't survive, they will end by insisting that people be electrocuted for daring to conceive without a license.

Of course, today, they're still on the side of keep-everybody-alive. So the thought that someone might be so profoundly repulsive that everybody in their immediate neighborhood wants to let them die, is something they cannot tolerate. Nor can we for that matter. We're not as tough as we sound. We too live in this enormous supermarket of suburban guilt. Because we know we are all destroying the landscape with our homes and our highways. There's such a gassy, dead dull air over everything. Which we create. When you traveled, it used to be the only bad air you ever

smelled was in a smoker on a train. Now that air is over everything.

Fresh air is the anomaly. We almost do not know what to do with it. Given this guilt we live in, we opt for keeping everybody alive because we know we're destroying everything. But that's also why we're, on the other hand, nihilistic. That's why we laugh every time a line or an idea or a disclosure cuts the feet off somebody. We all sit in this guilt that we don't necessarily deserve to live, and that maybe we ought to get back to the old idea of the kill society. ~~So people like Manson just drive us up the tree. This guy's going out and doing it.~~

STRATTON: Another aspect of Manson that upset everybody was the sex orgies carried on by the "family." The real horror for the American middle class was to know Manson and his family were engaging in out-and-out sex orgies, exactly what so much of the middle class were doing themselves.

MAILER: I don't think the horror was in the idea of orgy itself. After all, one of the unspoken solutions to suburban life has been the orgy. There have probably been more organized balls among respectable people in the seventh and eighth decades of American life in this twentieth century than any other time, certainly in any other mass democratic society. I don't think there's been anything remotely approaching the incidence of systematized orgy we have here. People putting aside Friday night or Saturday night for their orgy, with their neighbors, their special neighbors.

But these orgies have always been, by every book report we have of them, always highly civilized, indeed the most highly civilized expression of sexual endeavor you can find. I mean, nobody at an orgy ever throws a punch. Suddenly America learns about this orgiastic life in Manson's gang that ends in mass murder. Anybody who's ever been in a civilized orgy knows that what you're left with, besides a few interesting memories to feed that part of your fantasy which still needs to be nourished, is a kind of buried bleak sense not so far from murder. I mean, I don't know that most people come out of an orgy full of love. No, a cold icelike feeling is more usually awakened. Most people sense the orgy has left them more murderous than when they started. Now, suddenly, Manson comes along with *his* orgies, and Boom, the murders do take place. Indeed, it's as if the murders were cooked to the boiling point by those orgies. Measure the shock then in the orgiastic suburbs.

STRATTON: Because Manson didn't come from their numbers. I

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STRATTON: Are they equal to technology?

MAILER: Or are they the opposite?

STRATTON: The opposite.

MAILER: It seems to me you ought to have your Devil, just for the sake of this little matter, one place or the other.

STRATTON: Yes, I said that I think technology may be a tool of the Devil, a means to an end, the end being the complete leaching out of our souls.

MAILER: To drive people toward shit and blood.

STRATTON: Right. Right. This is Satan's cunning. In a technological and spiritually starved society, he may gain complete control.

MAILER: Well, let me think about that. And have a drink.

STRATTON: Okay. Just to continue with this idea, ~~it may be that technology is a transitional stage as far as the Devil is concerned.~~

I've got to believe God is more opposed to the dead spirit of technology than the Devil would be. I think that the Devil may have said to himself, Well, it looks to me like the only way I'm ever going to win final control over mankind is to offer them all those things they seem to want most, material comforts, wealth, prosperity and lack of suffering, to eliminate suffering from the world. People don't want to suffer, they immediately reach for a pill, mother's little helper.

So, my notion, anyway, is that technology, science, pollution, whatever, is finally probably a tool of the Devil that is going to starve and deaden the soul to such a degree that man will reach out for the funkiness, then for horror. ~~back to Charlie Manson!~~

MAILER: I think you're passing over too much. To begin with, there's no reason to equate science and technology any more than we put art and bestsellerdom together. After all, there's no reason to assume a bestseller is a work of art at a lower level. That may be a legitimate way to characterize a bestseller, or the opposite may be true, that a bestseller is the precise opposite of art, and to the degree the work is a bestseller, it is meretricious.

STRATTON: Technology may be the opposite of science, then?

MAILER: Well, I think there's much reason to believe that it is. Science, for most of its history, was essentially a poetic endeavor. Every metaphor, if you stop to think about it, is an equation. If you say, "The sparrow is on the wing," that's a scientific remark, it's a way of saying that the center of essence in the sparrow is within the wing, the sparrow is *on* the wing. It's a way of saying that the sparrow exists in two manifestations at once, body and

flight, just as light consists of waves and particles. The sparrow is on the wing. As you start to bear down on the language, you begin to feel the very vibrancy of the wing. The condition of being in two states at once. The sparrow is *on* the wing. You can fix on that point endlessly because it's a metaphor, an equation, a moment of balance. Originally, science had that quality, that its fundamental recognitions were, dare I say it? — poetic.

STRATTON: It was an art at that point?

MAILER: Absolutely an art. Technology is finally, I would suggest, a tradition, and a dull one. A statistical tradition. Technology derives from General Ulysses S. Grant, who said that if I bring enough men and enough ammunition to bear at one point on this line, and if I don't care how many troops of mine get killed, and I just keep pursuing this, if my ego is finally larger than any question that's presented to me, then I am obliged to triumph because I do not care. And he won.

Grant changed the nature of war. Before that, war always consisted of the obligation to win with a certain minimum of skill and grace. There was a code of war. Robert E. Lee subscribed to that code, he believed that you did not win battles at any price, that you didn't lose half your army to win a battle. Because at that point something dreadful would happen. Grant, having to contend with a miserable drafted army, people who did not want to fight the war — the Civil War as far as the North was concerned was not too unlike the war in Vietnam, ~~in the sense that the troops had absolutely no desire to fight~~ — Grant just kept putting in more and more bodies to blast their way through the noise.

Now that's technology. Technology does not really care what happens in the aftermath, it wishes to succeed on this point. It does not even need to have theory in order to proceed, let alone art. It will push its way through. It is an ego manifestation, ~~and all right. There's nothing in this that says it's therefore~~ → P 795 opposed to the notion of the Devil. The Devil may indeed be ego. But we have to draw back just enough to ask ourselves one further question, and it comes up to me as follows. Where is God in all this?

STRATTON: Well, God may be the loss of ego.

MAILER: No, no, no. Face into technology. What's God's relation to technology? Do you believe in God?

STRATTON: Yes.

MAILER: Do you believe God is not dead at all? Is very much alive?

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compact out of some dire necessity. Where we're far apart is, I don't believe in an omnipotent God. I believe in a God who's like us only more so. Who has a vision of existence of which we are very much a part. Because we will either fulfill that vision of existence, or we will fail God.

STRATTON: No, I can't agree. God is perfection. I don't actually believe in an omnipotent god as much as in a god whose nature is finally unknowable, as is perfection.

MAILER: The idea that the nature of God is unknowable, at this point, when the world's dying in the exudate of all its diseases, is a cop-out.

STRATTON: Not if you think of God in terms of a quality, a state of being toward which you're constantly trying to become closer, to come in harmony with an ongoing struggle.

MAILER: You've been saying that you want to talk about drugs a little, and I think they're related to this question in a fashion. I think drugs bear the same relation to mysticism as technology to science.

We're coming to learn that most of the world's mystics, in one way or another, have or had their drug. The mystical societies most mystics have been revering for centuries did have, in one fashion or another, their drug ritual. So, it isn't so simple a matter as saying that if you take a drug then you're a technologist and not a scientist. It does mean that there is a use of drugs among mystics and mystical societies which was reverential, ceremonial, sacramental.

The use of drugs today, if we're going to employ an analogy, is again comparable to the war in Vietnam: If you have a great deal of money to spend and very few results to show, and if you can't find the enemy, well then, goddamnit, says Barry Goldwater, burn down the fucking foliage. Scorch those gooks, get them out of there. Denude the land and you will find what is there. That is what the allegedly best generation of our young are doing to their minds. They're saying, If I can't find the idea I was looking for yesterday, I am going to take twice as much tonight.

STRATTON: I'll take a thousand more mics of LSD and burn down the foliage of my mind.

MAILER: Burn down the foliage of my mind to find some of those ideas I can feel running around in there. It's a military operation, it's technological.

I don't think drugs are going to find God or the Devil. I think what they're going to create is the scorched earth of consumed

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karma. I believe, you know, that one has to be as reverential about drugs as about sex. The mark of an utter idiot, in my mind, is to find, let's say he's a man who falls passionately in love with a woman. He finds this divine cunt and he not only fucks the hell out of her but fucks the hell out of himself until his balls are as wet as gravel. You know, he is grinding his ass up over the stones to get in one more fuck for the ego. He's gone over. He is a gassed-out, farted-out goose. That is our drug addict. That's what the drug addict is doing to mysticism. If God is a rabbit, the drug addict is trying to kill that rabbit with a thousand flails. *End*

In religious discussion, when we start to talk about this tripartite nature of the confusion, God, Devil and technology, and what is with whom, it may serve us to take one little look at cosmology today. One notion that the physicists presented to us about fifty years ago was the idea of the expanding universe. The galaxies were traveling outward. There's reason to decide that we live in a universe which expands and contracts. Curious, isn't it?

More than that, a universe in which stars expand and contract. Stars exhibit red light in their spectrum and blue—red lights as they expand, no surprise to any of us humans, and blue as they turn cold. As they contract more and more, they turn black. They become the essence of matter, become so compressed, so black, that a star which was once a million miles in diameter is now two miles in diameter, a mile in diameter. It becomes so compressed that finally it is the size of your thumbnail and weighs more than the sun. At least, that is what cosmological evidence and theory has brought certain physicists to thinking.

At that point, there's a gravitational mass so intense that it pulls in everything to it. It pulls in light. Einstein delivered the general theory of relativity, which was that light would be bent by gravity. Indeed it was, as the famous experiment in 1919 or 1922, was it 1919? showed—that light from Mercury in an eclipse was bent by the sun. Now, when we begin to consider these wholly concentrated implusions of matter which have more mass than the sun, they must pull everything into them. Everything disappears. You cannot ever see these particular stars, which are called black holes in space, because everything goes into it, and comes out where, somewhere else. Hm?

That is a more curious model of the universe than we're used to considering. Now physics deals with notions of matter and anti-matter. Is it so outrageous then to speak of death as having a life which has as many laws as life?

1980?

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A Brief Exchange

*with Anita Eichholz**



ANITA EICHHOLZ: You said that the Women's Movement tends to become totalitarian and that you don't like that. Don't you think the male system in America is totalitarian?

NORMAN MAILER: Yes, but I always thought women had more sense than men.

EICHHOLZ: Why is that? Why should women be better than men?

MAILER: Because they have been forced to suffer our brutalities and our stupidities and our dominance and people that are on the bottom should always be smarter than people on top, or there is no hope for humanity.

EICHHOLZ: But you don't get better by suffering.

MAILER: You don't get a better person, but you should get a smarter one. I think that the average black knows more about life than the average white in America. I've never met — this is a remark that I've made before and people think I'm blowing smoke — I've never met a stupid black man. I've met any number of black men I couldn't speak to, who wouldn't talk to me or I couldn't talk to them, but I never met a black who I felt was stupid. Because stupidity is a choice. It's not a choice that black people can afford.

EICHHOLZ: But you can't compare blacks in every respect to women.

MAILER: Well, but the women in America do. They say: We are your blacks.

EICHHOLZ: This isn't true in all respects.

MAILER: No, of course not. That's one of the troubles with the Women's Movement. They say a great many things that are not true in all respects but they say it as if it is.

EICHHOLZ: But why can't you answer my question with respect to women? Why should women be smarter than men and do everything better than they and be more clever than they are?

MAILER: There's no reason why they should be better. On the other hand, they should not be worse. Men over the centuries have acquired, willy-nilly, a certain rudimentary sense of fair play. The women have yet to learn it. I think they may. I'm not saying that it is impossible for them. But the Women's Movement over the last ten years has not gained respect among those men who are willing to give it. The general attitude among the women in America by now — I do not pretend to speak for them, it's my impression — is that many mistakes were made ten years ago when the movement first came into prominence, great excesses, and the problem is much more difficult than they ever realized. I think there was a certain optimism, almost a manic optimism, among the women back in the early Seventies. They thought they were going to have a quick breakthrough and change the world very quickly and I think that what they've come to recognize  — and I think this is all to the good — they've come to recognize the profound and serious problems that men who are trying to change the world also have. I think that out of all this we may yet arrive at a certain community of agreement that changing the world is a problem that goes beyond sexual gender.

EICHHOLZ: But you could start with that.

MAILER: You could start with that, but you could start with other notions as well. You could start with the idea that the most evil substance on earth today is plastic and that the way to improve society is to tax plastic heavily and reduce all other taxes. If you could remove plastic from human existence, things might be better because people's senses might be more lively. If people's senses were more lively — for instance, if we were in a room with chandeliers instead of these goddamn fluorescent lights overhead — we might all have a little more communion with one another.

EICHHOLZ: Yes, but that's exactly the problem. The women's question is postponed to all other questions.

MAILER: Well, that's your point of view and I respect it. That the women's question does not have enough prominence. My feeling is that the women have had a huge amount of prominence because the nature of their question was such that television loved it. It made good television — the women having a revolution. But in fact, in America all the women revolutionaries stayed in New York where they were comfortable and safe and very few went down to Texas. It's one thing to be a revolutionary, it's another to be a brave revolutionary. I just say they're not quite as good as they pretend to be.

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mean, he had been seventeen years out of thirty-five in prison. So he was a natural to take the orgy all the way to murder.

MAILER: Well, I don't think it was that automatic. He also had something inside him he couldn't control at all. His paranoid side, where he saw the blacks taking over the country. At a certain moment he was going to rise as some sort of gray eminence for the blacks and yet at the same time do his best to wipe them out. He had those huge plans to flee to the desert when the war was coming.

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In the crudest psychoanalytical terms, his real connection was to his own timetable toward disaster. It was approaching very quickly. Because he was a man of Napoleonic ambition, he took this interior sense his body and his mind were providing him — the psyche secretly saying to him, "Man, the climax is coming. You will not be able to keep your murderous impulses in hand more than ~~ten~~ ^{to} ten months ~~ten~~ ^{to} ten days." That's why we shrink from any fanatic who comes to us and says, "The end of the world is near."

START

STRATTON: Let's talk a bit more about the women's movement. I admit many of the women I find most exciting, most impressive, have tendencies toward women's liberation. But I don't think they understand what they call male chauvinism. I love women who have great character and spunk and are not content with being put in any simple category. But I fear the real thrust of this movement is to demean love and attraction between the sexes. A man who loves women is a pig. It's an antiromantic notion. It's sexual technology.

~~WUGGERS~~

~~PROBES~~

~~Stratton~~
~~Gottlieb~~

MAILER: Hey, Stratton, this isn't the way you were talking a year ago! I mean, the women are getting to you. They're getting to me and getting to you. Let's face it, they're winning their war.

STRATTON: You think so. They're winning their battle, perhaps. Meanwhile we're all losing our war. What women's liberation does is diminish sexuality.

MAILER: Well — I agree that the tendency is to diminish sexuality. I'm not pretending to know whether it's going to diminish sexuality for *all* time. But I think the immediate effect has been to take something out of it all. That's right in the need of the century. It's still a technological century and too much instinctive sex mucks up the machine.

There are two ways a technological society can weaken sex, through huge puritanism like the Russians, or you can do it through huge license — pornography, a sexual revolution, an-

drogyny, gay lib, women's lib — huge license is even desirable to technology if it'll consume sexual energy and keep it at a low fucked-out level. I mean, what's the use of being able to make love to anyone, any man or any woman, if finally your incentive is taken away altogether? If the hunt is gone? The danger? The rebellion? The achievement? If you now ram it home to a woman and show her where she lives, what are you doing? Naught but revealing the secret boar in your asshole.

STRATTON: "My cunt is my chariot."

MAILER: Well, God bless them. You know, their cunt is their chariot. No one's ever going to be able to write about the way in which my generation grew up, you know, with this secret, profoundly sentimental adoration of the subtle superiority of women to ourselves. That marvelous sense of a woman's wit, that sly sense of the point which arrived so naturally into their thought. That sense of audience a woman provides. That notion we had of ourselves as audience to a woman. That tenderness. That respect for the immanence of a mystery so intimate, so nice, so near, so funny. We were so much stronger than women, and yet not at all. They were so much more powerful than we were, and yet never at all — never in any way. We lived as such romantic and sentimental equals.

Now we've come into another world where we recognize that they lied, they cheated, they worked overtime to give us this lovely sustaining notion, but all the while their egos were being rotted, their guts were filled with caustic, they were left with the dishes, they were left with the diapers. Left with the pale smell of water and grease and the slightly more unfortunate smell of formula milk and baby shit. And saw their careers going down into dull, somewhat incomprehensible dialogues with plumbers. While we came back and bayed at the moon, and said, you do not support me sufficiently, woman, to enable me to reach the moon. You know?

And then a couple of guys reach the moon, and some guys after them, and they all talk like women libertarians when they get there. In jargon. In a total, perfect, hermetic language. We'd looked upon these men in awe. These guys were cats, they were going out and doing things that really would stop up our stomach. And they had done it, they did it.

STRATTON: Yet they were sexless.

MAILER: They weren't sexless. They were women's libbies. What no one will ever understand is, the first guys to reach the

moon — they were men, you know, in terms of bravery. More man than I for sure, maybe more than you, Stratton. They were men. But they had the minds of women's libbies. They were working for the team. They thought of only one thing, can't betray the team, cannot allow an alien idea to ever enter their eyeball, their nose, their mouth, their ear or their fingertips long enough to disrupt the ideological system.

STRATTON: A romantic idea is an alien idea to them.

MAILER: I don't mean a romantic idea. I mean any idea that's not in the system. You could have an antiromantic idea, they still wouldn't let it enter. They have nothing against romance.

STRATTON: Women's liberation is ultimately a team effort?

MAILER: Women's liberation is an astronaut system. ~~END~~

STRATTON: All right, let's talk about the music we just heard. Truman Capote was hired by *Rolling Stone* to cover the Rolling Stones concert when they were here the last time to tour the States. And he finally didn't do the article because he said the Stones had no mystery for him. But there's a lot of mystery in Jagger's personality and in the personality of the group as a whole.

MAILER: There's something unsatisfying about Jagger. We must have listened to two hours of music. Jagger's always promising so much more than he delivers. You know, finally he's in a sinister bag — he is certainly of all, if we take the three, four, five, six major rock groups in the last ten years, he has been the one who was the most sinister. Yet he's finally not terrifying. Maybe that's what Capote meant, I don't know.

STRATTON: Jagger himself, or his music?

MAILER: His music. I don't know anything about him. I think that the Beatles, you know, can hit eight bars in *Sgt. Pepper* that are more frightening, even though they're not sinister. The Beatles had more of a sense of powers they could summon by playing the wrong note at a given moment. It's as if they're more terrified by music than Jagger. Jagger's terribly spoiled. There's all that muttering in the background: "Oh, no God, you won't break this heart of stone."* What a threat. Beyond that constant dirge, beyond the throatiness which makes you think he's riding on the rims, through all that electric masturbation, you know, all that sound of distant musketry, every drumbeat, there's still a mountain of bullshit. It's not getting in and saying, I'm going to kill

* "Heart of Stone" by Mick Jagger and Keith Richard. © 1965, Abkco Music Co.

1976

Satan
Christ, Satan and the Candidates
- a visit to Jimmy Carter in Plains

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JIMMY CARTER

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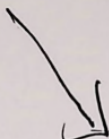
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Christ, ~~the~~^{Satan} and the Candidate
— a visit to Jimmy Carter in Plains

Plains was different from what one expected. Maybe it was the name, but anticipation had been of a dry and dusty town with barren vistas, ramshackle warehouses and timeless, fly-buzzing, sun-baked afternoons. Instead, Plains was green. As one approached, the fields were green and the trees were tall. The heat of southern Georgia was as hot in summertime as it promised to be, but there was shade under the elms, the pecan trees and the oaks, and if the streets were wide, the foliage was rich enough to come together overhead. A surprising number of houses were big and white and wooden and looked to be 50 years old or more. Some were a hundred years old. They had porches and trees in the front yard, and lawns ran a good distance from the front door to the sidewalk while the grass to the rear of the house meandered leisurely into the back yard of the house on the street behind. Some homes might be newly painted, and some were shabby, but the town was pleasant and spread out for a population of 683 inhabitants. By comparison with meaner looking places with a gas station, barbecue shack, general store, junkyard, empty lots and spilled gasoline, a redneck redolence of dried ketchup and hamburger napkins played around thin-shanked, dusty trees, Plains felt peaceful and prosperous. It had the sweet deep green of an old-fashioned town that America has all but lost to the Interstates and the ranch houses, the mobile homes and the condominiums, the neon strips of hotted-up truck stops and the static pall of shopping centers. Plains had an antique store on the main street that must have been a hundred feet deep, and it was owned by Alton Carter, Jimmy Carter's uncle; Plains had a railroad running through the middle of the main street and a de-



pot that was not more than twice as long as a tinker's wagon: Plains had an arcade one block long (the length of the main street) and all the stores were in the shade under the arcade, including a brand new restaurant called The Back Porch with white tin ceilings 15 feet high, four-blade propeller fan turning overhead and chicken-salad sandwiches with a touch of pineapple and a touch of pepper—tasty. Plains was that part of America which hitherto had been separate from the media,

the part that offered a fundamental clue to the nature of establishment itself. One could pass through a hundred small towns in a state, and 20 or 30 might be part of a taproot for the establishment of its capitol to draw upon. A place like Plains could be modest by the measure of its income and yet offer an unmistakable well-ordered patina, a promise that the mysterious gentility of American life was present, that there were still people interested in running things without showing the traces, that the small-town establishment remained a factor to be taken account of among all the other factors like exhaust roar and sewage slick and those plastic toylands stretching to the American horizon.

Maybe it was the architecture of the leading church in each town that gave the clue. Plains Baptist Church, now famous for the Sunday Bible classes for men conducted once a month (in his turn) by Jimmy Carter, had a fine architecture within. Painted white, with a ceiling of gracious wooden eaves, and two splendid old chairs with red velvet seats on either side of the pulpit, it was an elegant church for a very small town, and its architect, whoever he had

~~been~~—one could hope it was the town carpenter—must have lived a life that dwelt with ease in the proportions and needs of ecclesiastical space. The choir sang the hymns and the congregation sang with them, the words full of Christian exaltation, their sword of love quivering in the air, that secret in the strength of Christianity where the steel is, smelted from the tears. "I will sing the wondrous story of the Christ who died for me," went the words, "how He left His home in glory for the cross of Calvary." When they came to sing, "Bringing in the sheaves," or may it have been, "When the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there," a member of the choir took out his harmonica and played it with feeling pure enough to take one back to the last campfires of a Confederate Army 111 years gone, the harmonica stirring old river reeds out of the tendrils of the past. It was a fine church service, and it gave the visitor from the North a little too much to think about, especially since he had spent a bemused hour in the basement of Plains Baptist Church somewhat earlier the same Sunday morning taking in Men's Bible Class 10 to 11 A.M. The basement, a schoolroom with institutional pale green walls, gray floor, gray metal seats, a blackboard and a metal table up front for the deacons where Jimmy Carter sat, even an open window on the other side of which a ladder was leaning, had been relatively filled this Sunday with curious visitors, some press and two women from the media who had been allowed, as a political point (in the ongoing epic of women's liberation) to be admitted. They must have wondered what they were seeing. There was a devotion in the dry little voice, drier than gunpowder, of the deacon who

interpreted the scripture, a farmer or a shop-keeper, thin as jerky dried in the sun, a dry, late-middle-aged man with eyeglasses, hollow cheeks and an ingrown devotion that resided in the dungeon clamor of his lungs. He spoke in a wispy Georgia snuffle, very hard to hear, and his piety being as close to him as the body of one young beloved clasping the body of another through the night, it was ~~difficult even to be certain where his~~
~~text was in books—it was~~ not the place to pull out a pad and start taking notes, ~~but something may~~
~~have been said concerning the hearer of the word~~
~~who was not a deer, which led naturally into his~~
~~theme that "faith without works was dead."~~

In the second row of seats, the first row being all but empty, sat the real stalwarts of the Bible class, seven or eight big Georgia farmers, pleased by the crowd of visitors in the class, bemused in their own right that the church, the town, the county was a center suddenly of all the buzzing, insectlike instruments of the media and the peculiar pale faces of the media people. The second row owned the basement. They nudged each other in the ribs as they sat down next to one another. "Didn't see you sneak in here," they said to each other. They were the meat and mind of the South. They looked as if they had been coming here 50 Sundays a year for 20 years, here to think whatever thoughts they had on such occasions—one might be better situated to read the minds of Martians—and they were impressive in their mixture of hard-working bodies and hard-working hands, red necks with work-wrinkle lines three sixteenths of an inch deep, and the classic ears



of Southern farmers, big ears with large floppy chewed-out lobes as if they had been pulled on like old dugs over the 10,000 problems of their years. Men's Bible Class was teaching that Christian love was unselfish devotion to the highest good of others, and up front Jimmy Carter sat silently at the metal table with a couple of other deacons, his face calm, his mind attentive to one knew not necessarily what, dressed in a gray-blue suit and harmonious tie, and the hour passed and it was time to go upstairs to 11 o'clock service.

Somewhere the yeast must have been working in the religious call, for in the early afternoon, a couple of hours after church, when his private interview with Jimmy Carter took place, it proved to be the oddest professional hour Norman Mailer ever spent with a politician—it must have seemed twice as odd to Carter. In retrospect, it quickly proved mortifying (no lesser word will do) since to his embarrassment, Mailer did too much of the talking. Perhaps he had hoped to prime Carter to the point where they could have a conversation, but the subject he chose to bring up was religion, and that was ill-chosen. A man running for President could comment about Christ, he could comment a little, but he could hardly afford to be too enthusiastic. Religion had become as indecent a topic to many a contemporary American as sex must have been in the 19th century. If half the middle-class people in the Victorian period held almost no conscious thoughts about sex, the same could now be said of religion, except it might be even more costly to talk about than

1833

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sex, because religious conversations invariably sound insane when recounted to men or women who never feel such sentiments. Since it was a safe assumption that half of America lived at present in the 19th century and half in the 20th, a journalist who had any respect for the candidate he was talking to would not ask an opinion on sex or religion. Still, Mailer persisted. He was excited about Carter's theological convictions. He wanted to hear more of them. He had read the transcript of Bill Moyers's one-hour TV interview with Carter ("People and Politics," May 6, 10:00 P.M., Public Broadcasting Service) and had been impressed with a few of Carter's remarks, particularly his reply to Moyers's question, "What drives you?"

After a long silence Carter had said, "I don't know . . . exactly how to express it . . . I feel I have one life to live. I feel like that God wants me to do the best I can with it. And that's quite often my major prayer. Let me live my life so that it will be meaningful." A little later he would add, "When I have a sense of peace and self-assurance . . . that what I'm doing is the right thing, I assume, maybe in an unwarranted way, that that's doing God's will."

These were hardly historic remarks, and yet on reflection they were certainly remarkable. There was a maw of practicality that engulfed Presidents and Presidential candidates alike. They lived in all those supermarkets of the mind where facts are stacked like cans; whether good men or bad, they were hardly likely to be part of that quintessential elevation of mind that can allow a man to say, "Let me live my life so that it will be meaningful."



1834

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It was in the nature of politicians to look for programs to be meaningful, not the psychic substance of their lives. Reading the Moyers interview shortly before leaving for Plains must therefore have excited a last-minute excess of curiosity about Carter, and that was last-minute to be certain. Through all of the political spring when candidates came and went, Mailer had not gone near the primary campaigns. Working on his novel, he had made the whole decision not to get close to any of it. One didn't try to write seriously about two things at once. Besides, it was hard to tell much about Carter. Mailer thought the media had an inbuilt deflection that kept them from perceiving what was truly interesting in any new phenomenon. Since he rarely watched television any longer, he did not even know what Carter's voice was like, and photographs proved subtly anonymous. Still, he kept reading about Carter. In answer to the people who would ask, "What do you think of him?" Mailer would be quick to reply, "I suspect he's a political genius." It was all he knew about Carter, but he knew that much.

He also had to admit he enjoyed Carter's reaction to meeting Nixon and Agnew, McGovern and Henry Jackson, Hubert Humphrey, George Wallace, Ronald Reagan, Nelson Rockefeller, Ed Muskie. Carter confessed he had not been impressed sufficiently to think these men were better qualified to run the country than himself. Mailer understood such arrogance. He had, after all, felt enough of the same on meeting famous politicians to also think himself equipped for office, and had been brash enough to run for Mayor of New York in a Democratic primary. Mailer had always assumed

he would be sensational as a political candidate; he learned, however, that campaign work ran 18 hours a day, seven days a week, and after awhile it was not yourself who was the candidate but 50 percent of yourself. Before it was over, his belly was drooping—one's gut is the first to revolt against giving the same speech eight times a day. He came in fourth in a field of five, and was left with a respect for successful politicians. They were at least entitled to the same regard one would offer a professional athlete for his stamina. Later, brooding on the size of a conceit that had let him hope he could steal an election from veteran Democrats, Mailer would summarize his experience with the wise remark, "a freshman doesn't get elected president of the fraternity."

But Carter had. Carter must be a political genius. Nonetheless, Mailer felt a surprising lack of curiosity. Genius in politics did not interest him that much. He thought politics was a dance where you need not do more than move from right to left and left to right while evading the full focus of the media. The skill was in the timing. You tried to move to the left at that moment when you would lose the least on the right; to the right, when the damage would be smallest on the left. You had to know how to steer in and out of other news stories. It was a difficult skill, but hardly possessed of that upper esthetic that would insist skill be illumined by a higher principle—whether elegance, courage, compassion, taste or the eminence of wit. Politics called for some of the same skills you needed in inventing a new plastic. Politics called to that promiscuous material in the

1836 9

personality that could flow into many a form. Sometimes Mailer suspected that the flesh of the true politician would yet prove nonbiodegradable and fail to molder in the grave!

Still, there was no question in his mind that he would vote for Carter. In 1976 he was ready to vote for many a Democrat. It was not that Mailer could not ever necessarily vote for a Republican, but after eight years of Nixon and Ford, he thought the country could use a Democratic Administration again. It was not that Ford was unendurable. Like a moderately dull marriage, Ford was endlessly endurable—one could even get fond of him in a sour way. Jerry Ford, after all, provided the clue to how America had moved in 50 years from George Babbitt to Jerry Ford. He even offered the peculiar security of having been shaped by forces larger than himself. Maybe that was why Ford's face suggested he would do the best he could with each problem as he perceived it: "Don't worry

about me," said his face, "I'm not the least bit dialectical."

Of course, the President was only a handmaiden to the corporate spirit. The real question was whether the White House could afford another four years of the corporate spirit, that immeasurably self-satisfied public spirit whose natural impulse was to cheat on the environment and enrich the rich.

It was certainly time

for the Democrats. He would, despite his considerable respect for Gene McCarthy, probably vote for any Democrat who got the nomination. Nonetheless, it was irritating to have so incomplete an idea of Carter, to be so empty of any thesis as to whether he might be deemed ruthless, a computer or saintly.

coming closer to what he wanted to discuss with Carter in the interview that would be granted next day. The sexual revolution had come out of a profound rejection of the American family—it had been a way of saying to the parents, "If you say sex is dirty, then it has to be good, because your lives are false!" But Carter would restore the family. Faithful, by public admission, to his wife for 30

A day earlier,
on the press
plane to Albany,
Albany, Georgia,
he had felt—
what with a
few drinks
inside him—
that he was

~~1837~~
years, he was in every way a sexual conservative. Since his economic proposals would appeal to progressives, he might be undertaking the Napoleonic proposition of out-flanking two armies, Republicans and Democrats, from the right and the left. Yes, there was much to talk about with Carter. Even on the airplane, Mailer could feel his head getting overcompressed with themes of conversation arriving too early.

Jimmy Carter's home was on a side street, and you approached it through a barricade the Secret Service had erected. It was possible this was as unobtrusive a small-town street as the Secret Service had ever converted into an electronic compound with walkie-talkies, sentries and lines-of-sight. The house was in a grove of trees, and the ground was hard-put to keep its grass, what with pine needles, pecan leaves and the clay of the soil itself, which gave off a sandy-rose hue in the shade.

The rambling suburban ranch house in those trees spoke of California ancestry for its architecture, and a cost of construction between \$50,000 and \$100,000, depending on how recently it was built. The inside of the house was neither lavish nor underfurnished. ~~not~~ sumptuous nor

1838

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mean—a house that spoke of comfort more than taste; the colors laid next to one another were in no way brilliant, yet neither did their palette of soft shades depress the eye, for they were cool in the Georgia summer. Carter's study was large and dark with books, and there were busts of Kennedy and Lincoln, and his 8-year-old daughter Amy's comic book (starring Blondie) was on the floor. It was the only spot of red in all the room. Over his desk was a fluorescent light.

Maybe Carter was one of the few people in the world who could look good under fluorescent light. Wearing a pale blue button-down shirt open at the neck—pale blue was certainly his color—Carter's presence had a quintessential American cleanliness, that silvery light of a finely tuned and supple rectitude that produces our best ministers and best generals alike, responsible for both the bogs of Vietnam and the vision of a nobler justice. ~~But then it~~

Now, sitting across the desk from Carter, ~~thinking of that cheerful and cordial, if not unwary host who had managed the greeting of the night before,~~ he was struck by a quiet difference in Carter this Sunday afternoon. Maybe it was the result of church, or maybe the peril implicit for a politician in any interview—

~~QED~~

~~since~~ since one maladroit phrase can ruin a hundred good ones—but Carter seemed less generous than he had promised to be the night before, less a convivial executive and more a dean of students responding to questions with the idea that above all, the university itself must be protected. Of course, Mailer soon knew to his horror that he was close to making a fool of himself, if indeed he had not done it already, because with his first question taking five minutes to pose, and then 10, he had already given a speech rather than a question. What anguish this caused, that he—known as criminally egomaniacal by common reputation, and therefore for years as careful as a reformed criminal to counteract the public expectation of him—was haranguing a future President of the United States. He had a quick recollection of the days when he ran for Mayor and some fool or other, often an overly educated European newspaperman, would ask questions that consisted of nothing but long-suppressed monologues. To make matters worse, Carter was hardly being responsive in his answer—how could he be? Mailer's exposition dwelt in the bowels of that limitless schism in Protestantism—between the funda-

1840

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mental simplicities or good moral life as exemplified by ~~the original on James~~ a few hours ago in Bible class, and the insuperable complexities of moral examination opened by Kierkegaard, whose work, Mailer now told Carter with enthusiasm, looked to demonstrate that we cannot know the moral role we enact. We can feel saintly and yet be evil in the eyes of God, feel we are evil (on the other hand) and yet be more saintly than we expect; equally, we may do good even as we are feeling good, or be bad exactly when we expect we are bad. Man is alienated from his capacity to decide his moral worth. Maybe, Mailer suggested, he had sailed on such a quick theological course because Carter had quoted Kierkegaard on the second page of his autobiography. "Every man is an exception," Kierkegaard had written.

But it was obvious by the smile on Carter's face—a well of encouragement to elicit the point of this extended question—that Carter was not necessarily one of America's leading authorities on Kierkegaard. How foolish of Mailer to expect it of him—as if Norman in his turn had never quoted an author he had

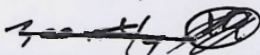


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not lived with thoroughly.

Having failed with the solemnity of this exposition, but his voice nonetheless going on, beginning to wonder what his question might be—did he really have one, did he really enter this dialogue with the clean journalistic belief that ultimate questions were to be answered by Presidential candidates?—he now began to shift about for some political phrasing he could offer Carter as a way out of these extensive hypotheses. The sexual revolution, Mailer said hopefully, the sexual revolution might be a case in point. And he now gave the lecture he had prepared the night before—that the family, the very nuclear family whose security Carter would look to restore, was seen as the enemy by a large fraction of Americans. "For instance," said Mailer, clutching at inspiration, "there are a lot of people in New York who don't trust you. The joke making the rounds among some of my friends is 'How can you put confidence in a man who's been faithful to the same woman for 30 years?'"

Carter's smile showed real amusement, as if he knew something others might not necessarily know. Of course, whether he was smiling to the left or right of this issue was

another matter. Curiously encouraged by the ambiguous fiber of the smile, Mailer went on toward asking his first question. He had presented the joke, he suggested, to show the gulf of moral differences that awaited a Carter Presidency—for instance, to talk of the drug problem just a moment, there were new studies, the up-coming Ed Epstein book, "An American Coup d'Etat" was an example, that showed drug addiction might finally be more a state of mind than a true physical addiction. Statistics re-examined showed that addicts deprived of heroin, or methadone, did not commit more crimes to get scarce heroin, but instead took speed, or barbiturates, or pot, or even went to bourbon. The implication of this, Mailer said, is that there's a chasm in the soul that might have to be filled, a need precisely not to be oneself, but rather to give oneself over to the Other, to give oneself to some presence outside oneself; the real answer to drug addiction might not be in social programs, but in coming to grips with the possibility that Satanism was loose in the 20th century. One question he would like to ask in line with this was whether Carter thought much about



~~the~~ the hegemony of Satan, or did he—yes, this unasked question was now being silently answered by Carter's eyes, yes, Carter's concern was not with Satan but with Christ. On and on went Mailer with considerable fever, looking, for instance, to propose that one difference between Carter's religious point of view as he, Mailer, presumed to comprehend it, and his own might be that he had a notion of God as not clearly omnipotent, but rather conceived of a powerful God who was at war with other, opposed visions in the universe—a ridiculous picture of God to present to Carter, Mailer told the candidate, except that going back to the Moyers interview where Carter had certainly said that he felt he might be doing God's will when he felt a sense of peace and self-assurance—did it ever bother Carter, keeping Kierkegaard's Principle of Uncertainty in mind, if he, Mailer, could, heh heh, steal a title from Heisenberg—did it ever bother him that God might be in anguish or rage at what He had not accomplished across the heavens? For instance, there was the Hasidic tale of Rabbi

Zusya who begged God to reveal himself in reward for Zusya's devotions to him, and God finally replied by revealing Himself, and Zusya crawled under the bed and howled in fear like a dog, and said, "O God, please do not reveal yourself to me." Did that story, that image of God, strike any chord in Carter, was there any recognition that God, close to losing could live in wrath and horror? Christ when all was said, had died on the Cross, on a mission He believed would succeed and had failed.

Mailer ground down into silence, furious with himself for scattering prodigious questions like buckshot. He looked across at Carter. He was realizing all over again that the only insanity still left in his head was this insane expectation he had of men in public places.

Carter nodded sadly. He looked a little concerned. He had every right to be. However would such an interview

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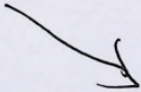
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appear in The New York Times?

Well, answered Carter soberly, thoughtfully, he was not certain that he could reply to everything that had been raised since their points of view were not the same in many respects. He was not, for instance, as devout and as prayerful as the press had perhaps made him out to be. Religion was something he certainly did and would live with, but he didn't spend as much time as people might expect exploring into the depths of these questions; perhaps—he suggested politely—he ought to be more concerned, but in truth, he did not think his personal beliefs were to be carried out by the Government; there were limits to what government could do, yet in those limits, he thought much more could be done than was now being done. For example, he would recognize that there is little that government could do directly to restore the family. Welfare payments might,

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for example, be revised in such a way that fathers would not be directly encouraged to desert their families, as they were most ironically now encouraged to do, but he would admit that this, of course, was to the side of the question. He supposed, Carter said, that the answer, as he saw it, was in turning government around so that it would be more of a model. There was a yearning in this country for the restoration of something precious. "There's been a loss of pride in this country that I find catastrophic." The deterioration of family values was linked, Carter thought, to that loss of pride. It would be his hope that if he could get the actual workings of the Government turned around, so that government was at once more efficient and more sensitive, then perhaps it could begin to serve as more of a model to counteract the fundamental distrust of people in relation to government, that is, their feeling they won't find justice. "The real answer is to get those of us who are running the Government going right." You see, Carter went on to say, he was not looking to restore the family by telling people how to live; he did not wish to be President in order to judge them. "I don't care," he said in his quiet



decent voice, as if the next words, while not wholly comfortable, had nonetheless to be said, "I don't care if people say—," and he actually said the famous four-letter word that The Times has not printed in the 125 years of its publishing life.

He got it out without a backing-up of phlegm or a hitch in his rhythm (it was, after all, not the easiest word to say to a stranger), but it was said from duty, from the quiet decent demands of duty, as if he, too, had to present his credentials to that part of the 20th century personified by his interviewer.

No, Carter went on, his function was not to be a religious leader but to bring the human factor back into economics. The same economic formula, he suggested, would work or not work depending on the morale of the people who were doing the work.

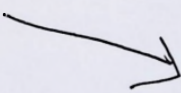
Mailer nodded. He believed as much himself. But he was still dissatisfied with his lack of contact on questions more fundamental to himself. Like a child who returns to the profitless point (out of obscure but certain sense of need) Mailer looked to return their conversation to Kierkegaardian ambiguities and so spoke of marijuana, for it

1848

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~~was~~ was on marijuana, he told Carter, that he had had the first religious experience he had ever known; indeed, marijuana might even pose the paradox of arriving at mystical states for too little; one began to feel the vulnerability of God about the time one recognized a little more clearly in the unwinding of the centers of one's consciousness that one was consuming one's karma, possibly stripping—for no more than the pleasure of the experience—some of the resources of one's future lives. He asked Carter then if he had any belief in reincarnation, in the reincarnation of karma as our purgatory here on earth? And Carter said no, Carter said he believed we had our one life and our judgment. And then with that gentle seductiveness all good politicians have, Carter mentioned that his understanding was not wholly alien to drugs, his sons had experimented with marijuana a few years ago, and had later done some work in the rehabilitation of addicts. He felt as if their experiences had helped them in such work.

Mailer was thinking morosely of the meeting of Sam Goldwyn and George Bernard Shaw to discuss making a film. Goldwyn had spoken of



his admiration for Shaw's work, of his love of fine dramatic subjects, of the pleasures of esthetics, and Shaw had finally replied, "Mr. Goldwyn, the difficulty is that you care only about art, and I am interested only in money." He had certainly been playing Goldwyn to Jimmy Carter's George Bernard Shaw—no, worse!

Mailer was finally beginning to feel the essential frustration of trying to talk about religion with Carter on equal terms. Carter had more troops, which is to say, he had more habits. If you go to church every Sunday for most of your life, then you end with certain habits. You live in a dependable school of perception. In the case of Baptists, it might be living with the idea that if you were good enough and plucky and lucky and not hating your neighbor for too little, Christ was quietly with you. Certainly, if you had the feeling He was with you at all, He was with you in church on Sunday. So you could form the habit over the years of thinking about Him in a comfortable way.

Maybe Carter saw God in the little continuing revelations churchgoing offered on the personalities of one's friends. It was like enjoying a film, or a best-selling novel.

Cause and effect lived in a framework you could perceive. A good man had his character written on his face.

Whereas, Mailer's love of God (we must assume he has some) owed too much to Kierkegaard, who could have said that a good man would have his character written on his face unless he wasn't a good man but an exceptional bad man with a good face—Mailer saw no reason why the Devil could not be the most beautiful creature God ever made. Yet, equally, a man could develop an evil face and a loving heart. There was the difference. Carter might be able to see hints of God in his neighbor; Mailer was forever studying old photographs of Gurdjieff and Rasputin.

They had come to the end of their hour. The author was feeling a dull relief that he would have, at least, another hour tomorrow. How fortunate that that had been scheduled in advance. He started to apologize in some roundabout form for how the first hour had gone, and Carter replied with his gracious smile, it was all right, he said, they had needed the first hour to loosen up, to become acquainted. Mailer left with the twice dull sense that he liked Carter more than Carter had any reason to like him.