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 flew back to New York alone, and Mailer went to Little Rock, where Norris had reserved a room at the Sheraton Hotel. Fig and Ecey were not told of the visit. During the he visit bought her a ring that she didn't take off for a long time. With Mathew, age three-and-a-half, staying overnight with her parents, Norris felt uninhibited; she was drawn to a man unlike anyone she had ever met. It wasn't just physical; she admired his running commentary on everything under the sun. But the sexual connection was strong. "Through the years, no matter the circumstances of our passions and rages, our boredoms, angers, and betrayals large and small, sex was the cord that bound us together," she wrote. They both realized after the two nights they spent together in Little Rock that their interlude could be the start of something big.

Norris was 26 when she met Mailer, exactly half his age. An Arkansas Tech graduate in art and English, she had worked in a pickle factory, as a bookkeeper, and as a high-school teacher. Married at 20 to her college boyfriend, Larry Norris, she was divorced at 25. She had never been away from home. In *A Ticket to the Circus*, she lists the "firsts" she achieved while getting to know Mailer: flying in an airplane, riding in a cab, drinking red wine, hearing live jazz, eating real Chinese food and seeing Chicago and New York. She relished it all, although was a bit intimidated at times, especially by her first visit to a jazz club. Carol was a well-known jazz artist and when Mailer introduced Norris to saxophonist Sonny Stitt, she felt like "an interloper" in Carol's world. But with her height, high cheekbones and red hair cascading over her shoulders, the former Little Miss Little Rock was usually the most beautiful woman in the room. "I instinctively knew that Norman needed a strong, confident woman, and that was what I was determined to be," ^{she} ~~Norris~~ wrote.

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Scott Fitzgerald said that the sign of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to function while holding opposed ideas in mind. By this measure, Mailer was a genius. After he became involved with Norris, he had to balance more irreconcilables—in love, family and work—than ever before. My private life, he wrote to Susan, “has erupted all over the place.” Half of him was exhilarated by the challenges; the other half was in the dumps. Smitten by Norris, he felt a deep attachment to Carol, and was not quite ready to break off with Suzanne. There were other women as well, Lois Wilson, Shari Rothe, a stewardess, and Carol Holmes, a former student of Bob Lucid’s ~~whom~~ ¹⁶⁵⁶ he was seeing in New York. He had also had a brief affair with Barbara Probst Solomon, who was a dear old friend of his and his sister’s. On the work side, he had made a good start on the Egyptian novel, but was enamored of several new projects, and not merely for financial reasons. All the while, he had the children with him at the Thomas House in Maine, as well as Carol (still in the dark about Norris), his mother and Myrtle, who in many ways helped keep the household running. He was appearing on talk shows, giving interviews, and doing readings to promote *The Fight*. Cook and Oliver were running his business affairs from Provincetown, and he was on the telephone with them constantly. His relations with Beverly were “harrowing,” he told Knox, and he stopped talking to her on the phone because “she’d end up shrieking.” To call Norris or Suzanne, he had to go to a phone booth. His situation during the summer of 1975 might be compared to his description of Ali on the ropes: riding a unicycle on a parapet.

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Not long after meeting Norris, Barney Rosset, of Grove Press, contacted him about doing an anthology of Henry Miller’s work, and Mailer, in need of ready money, jumped at the

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advance of \$50,000, to be divided with Miller. For all of that summer, when hiking or sailing with the kids, or entertaining guests, or keeping peace with his father, he was rereading Miller's books, beginning with *Tropic of Cancer*. Another project was editing a collection of his essays on political conventions, entitled *Some Honorable Men*, published the following year. He swore that when he completed work on the collection and the Miller book, he would return to the novel "before its spirit begins to expire." Despite this promise, he began talking to director Peter Bogdanovich about making a movie based on *An American Dream*. He wanted Cybill Shepherd, who had been in Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show* and *Daisy Miller* to play Cherry. The lure of film remained strong, although this project also died aborning.

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In mid-1975, the IRS began putting levies on all his income for back taxes of \$60,000. His other debts amounted to \$140,000. He still had some shares in the Village Voice, but had been unable to find a buyer. When it was sold to Clay Felker, Mailer got exactly enough from sale proceeds to pay off the government. "So I'm half breathing now, which is to say I got one lung back," he wrote to Larry L. King in July, adding that he would like to declare bankruptcy. "The only trouble is that the people I owe the money to I happen to be real fond of—like my mother." Then, about six weeks later, he learned that his accountant had made a gigantic error, and he owed another \$100,000 in taxes. This was a heavy blow, because he was living on what came in each month. "I'm really going to have to change my life style from top to bottom," he wrote to Knox, and "it's depressing because I have no habits for worrying about money." A big score was needed.

Norris knew nothing of her lover's finances. His letters to her were vague about everything except his passionate feelings. Memories of their last tryst and plans for the next one

filled pages. "For the first time in my life I don't want to possess my woman's soul," he wrote at the end of July after she had made her first trip to New York. "I want to have all of you, and we've gone so far already, but only at your rate." But after he had said goodbye to her, he got depressed, he wrote, by "the heavy and crossed responsibilities of my life."

I knew all we needed was twelve hours of sleep and we would be ready to explore into one another again for another week, and instead I was going to be throwing all the switches and working and playing with the children—that special species of work—and being considerate to Carol and missing you, missing your redheaded angelic insanity and your tender sense of the next move—little Miss I Ching of Spring meeting Old Hard-Heart's Ice, yes, it is new air to breathe when one is around you, and then I always hate good-byes in airports.

Norris' letters matched his for ardor.

I at last have found someone who is just a little tougher than I am, smarter than I am, and who can love with a passion and tenderness equal (at least) to everything I have to give. I love you. I believe with everything in me that we would be happy together. We feed each other—the monstrous egos that ride both our backs—the hot sexual needs that rise a little hotter each time we meet—the tenderness and love that is given and taken and in the process grows double its size. We are good for each other.

As the relationship grew, Mailer recommended that Norris (or Barbara, as he called her) read D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, with its frank examination of sexual relationships. His vision of

the love he hoped to achieve with her owed something to the dynamics of Lawrence's. "So often," he wrote, "one finds love, and then looks for a cave where one can feast on it—soon such love grows stale." He didn't want that; he wanted a love that they each deserved, a love that would put "every demand on us—because for once, I want to be in love without guilt, and want a woman to love me without guilt." She was in love with a man who had two selves, he wrote, and they corresponded to her own two. The first he called Cinnamon Brown:

[T]hat's your other female, the tall jaunty slightly mysterious woman who can't walk into a bar without turning it on since there's a sexual voltage comes off you then which you may even be unaware, and it says, 'I want to fuck. I want to fuck the most exciting man in the house, whoever he is, because that is the most natural expression for whatever peculiar reason I'm here,' and that lady, of course, is a distance away from Barbara who is looking to have one love till she dies and wants to make an art of that love so that she gives strength and gains strength and tenderness passes forward and back. And I, of course, love those ladies because there's one of them for each of me, Barbara for Norman since he is probably as tender as she is (that is saying a lot) and as much in love with the religion of love which is to make it with one's mate and thereby come out to a place very few people visit and you can be true to that idea of love; then another side not so different from Cinnamon, a cold creation full of lust who might just as well have a name like Ace or Duke or some such hard-cock name far from Norman—and yet not a bad side, no worse than Cinnamon, for so much of the action is there, even an instinct for some of the better adventures.

I used to be that way when I was twenty-six; I still am. One past needs to be in love—the other can remain in love only so long as the love keeps changing, and so if it is the same woman, the ante keeps rising. There has to be more and more. Of course one cannot always name what *more* might be—it is rather that one has to believe it is possible. Then the two sides of my nature come together.

He invited Norris to come to New York, to “try it for a while,” and sent her a plane ticket. No promises; it was an experiment. Matthew would remain with her parents for a few months until she got a job. Norris, an only child, said that her mother cried and then asked what kind of woman she was “to turn from all the people who love her?” Her father, a heavy equipment operator just a year older than Mailer, took it better, but “deep down he is very hurt,” she said. Norris told her parents that she would be living in an apartment near Mailer’s, “which would give Mother and Daddy the illusion that I wasn’t living in sin, although I certainly would be.” The cover story for Mailer’s family was that Norris was Fig’s niece, and was looking for a modeling job in New York, which was half-true. She arrived in mid-August, and Mailer came down from Maine for a week to help her get settled. Barbara and Al invited them over for pot roast, and Fan joined them. A couple of months later, Norris rented a small apartment in Fan’s building on Willow Street. It was a five-minute walk from 142 Columbia Heights.

Remembering Norris’ first months in New York, Barbara said, “I always tried to be totally non-judgmental about Norman’s newest woman; I didn’t want to not like them.” In Norris’ case, she had no reservations. “It was absolutely extraordinary that one could be that beautiful and that nice.” The arrival of Norris on the scene changed things, she explained. “She had that wonderful *joie de vivre*, really. She just loved the family; she made everybody feel life

was fun. She was enjoying herself. And she was tough. For instance, the relationship between Michael, Stephen and Matt was very difficult at first, but she managed to cope with it." It was easier with the girls, she said. "They got along famously—a lot of girl stuff." Fan also hit it off with Norris, and promised to teach her how to make pot roast. "I'm sure they had a lot of questions," Norris recalled, "but refrained from asking them." She continued her masquerade as a country girl looking for a job. "No one mentioned his wife," she recalled.

In Maine, he continued work on the Miller book, which he thought would present no problems. When he did encounter trouble, he wrote to Norris, it made him remember what Ali had told him: "There are no easy fights. The easy ones become the tough ones." Miller's work, in Mailer's view, was radically uneven, and exasperatingly difficult to characterize. But, as he told Norris, except for the lost time, he didn't mind the effort, because Miller "is the ideal subject whenever I become too in love with love, for he's in love with cunt—a healthy corrective: I start thinking of Big Red and her Arkansas gold." He continued work on the Miller book through the summer.

Neither Mailer nor Norris were sure that the experiment was going to be successful. His open-mindedness can be seen in an August 26 reply to a young woman journalist he knew: "If it wasn't for the fact that I'm married to one woman, living with another, and much concerned and complicated in my relations with two other fine women, I'd say to you, move to New York right away, because I think you're great." But in the fall, he had the difficult conversation with Carol. He told her that he was in love with Norris, and wanted to move from Stockbridge at the end of 1975. According to Mary Oliver, it was Molly Cook who made the difficult call to Suzanne Nye.

A few months before he died, Mailer spoke of the reasons for his breakup with Carol. He

said that part of it was Stockbridge which is in rural Massachusetts. The town is the home of the Tanglewood festivals, and many of the locals were musical, not literary. Mailer said he didn't know anything about classical music and "found them a dull gang, essentially," he said. There was more, as he explained.

I was bored due to the fact that my life was dwindling into less and less, or so it seemed. Carol had no interest in a social life, so that was the beginning of the heart of inactivity to me in the marriage. It would have kept us together, and sexually we were fine, too, so it was a lovely marriage in that one way and that was enough for a long time because as the years went by, it built and built. But, finally, when I met Norris, there was no question that I wanted to move, and did. This was the one marriage that broke up that I'd say that I broke up – that I felt bad about. Felt bad about leaving Maggie, felt bad about deserting Carol, who had never done me any harm.

There was another element, he said. "As a novelist, I thought, 'I'm not learning anything. If I don't learn anything, I'll dry up.' That was terribly important. And, of course, Norris just filled it all up. And was beautiful as well." In addition, she "loved" the social life in New York, and had been a very successful school teacher, so "to take care of six of my kids was nothing." Carol said that she never stopped loving Mailer, and after a time, began seeing him again, just as she had when he was living with Beverly.

Mailer divided his time between Stockbridge and New York. Now that Carol knew about Norris, Mailer began to introduce her to his children. Stephen remembers meeting her in

Provincetown. He was nine and Michael was eleven. "We were at Ciro's and Sal's for dinner and she walked in with Molly and Mary and my Dad. He might have introduced her as a friend of theirs. I thought she was great. She was beautiful, and a lot of fun. She was wearing a great hat." Danielle remembers that at that time she and her sister "were very jagged and spinning out of control," and Norris was very calm. We were "overly analytical and second-guess think she had that fault. She was very direct."

Susan remembers being "very upset" when Norris came on the scene. "She was so young and beautiful. Dad and I always had this thing with looks. I think I look most like him in many ways—in terms of physical appearance, my height, my eyes," and her father, she said, "was always finding fault with the way I looked. That's what I felt. I didn't dress well; I wasn't chic; I wasn't this, I wasn't that, my hair, my friends. So in walks this beautiful model and I had a shit fit." It was more of a shock for her than her siblings, she said, because she and Norris were the same age. At first, she thought it might be just "another of Dad's love affairs," but then, over a couple of months, she changed her mind. "Norris was really nice. There was something very sweet and earnest about her. She really tried hard; she reached out, and so I got to know her."

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Norris was pleased when Mailer asked her to go with him to the Philippines for the third and final boxing match—"The Thrilla in Manila"—between Ali and Frazier, on October 1. He was uncertain about writing about it, but the chance to see the landscape where he had fought three decades earlier appealed to him. After a 22-hour flight, they arrived. Norris remembers that her clothes were rumpled. The first person they saw as they walked into the airport was Larry

Schiller, who was photographing the fight for *Time*. Schiller had just exchanged money, and offered them a stack of Philippine pesos for dollars. Mailer, always wary of Schiller's schemes, hesitated, but then exchanged the money (and later learned it was a fair deal). Schiller was surprised to see him with a new woman. "Lo and behold, there's Norman with this knockout chick who's taller than him. He's got this chick on his arm." Mailer introduced her, "Here's my girl," Schiller recalled, and "the way he says it is like, 'What do you think?' You know? And I say to myself, 'What a pair of legs.'" Schiller, Norris wrote in her memoir, "would figure in our lives over and over throughout the years." The next collaboration would begin eighteen months later.

Mailer wanted to try to find the village outside Manila where he had spent time during the war, and a car and driver were provided. They took the highway south out of Manila and drove until there was no road. "There was like a little pig trail that went through the jungle," Norris recalled. "We were in this huge limousine going through this jungle with the leaves slapping on each side of the car and there's all these huts with reed ceilings and fronds and a village store." Mailer thought he recognized a large tree in the center of a field where his unit had bivouacked in 1945, and "in the spirit of the occasion, we pulled out a picnic basket, spread a cloth on the grass, and had a picnic under the tree that once had (maybe) sheltered a young Norman Mailer when he was hatching the plot for *The Naked and the Dead*." They spent a week in the Philippines, and saw Ali retain his crown in a bruising 15-round fight. Mailer decided not to write about it; he needed to finish his book on Miller.

The original title was *Mailer on Miller*, but he decided against foregrounding himself—another sign of his diminishing self-interest—and changed it to *Genius and Lust: A Journey*

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✓ *Through the Major Writings of Henry Miller*. He completed it shortly after he returned. Because of ~~some~~ difficulties obtaining permissions for the excerpts for the collection, the Miller book did not appear until the fall of 1976. Mailer had hoped to work on the Egyptian novel, but he had agreed to write a film script, his maiden effort in the genre. It had to be written rapidly, and in Italy.

✓ So, in late October, he and Norris flew to Rome. Mickey Knox had recommended Mailer to Sergio Leone, the maestro of spaghetti westerns, as the perfect person to adapt a novel by Harry Grey, *The Hoods*, about Prohibition-era Jewish gangsters in New York. Leone offered him \$75,000, a sum that would pay off most of his IRS bill. Mailer thought he could write it in a month. During the day, he worked at Leone's office while Norris explored the city. They spent almost every evening with Knox. He introduced them to a fashion designer, Angelo Litrico, who made Mailer a beautiful blue velvet suit. Midway through their stay, Leone said that he wanted enough material for two films, the first one to be called *Once Upon a Time in America*. Mailer made the necessary adjustments and two weeks later turned in a script of 200-plus pages. Mailer thought the script contained "some of my best dialogue." Leone, however, was unimpressed.

✓ A master of the close-up, Leone could also paint haunting images of lonely desert places, but as Knox explained, "Mailer's screenplay gave Leone a dish he couldn't possibly eat; it had serious social content." Shortly afterwards, the Italian magazine *Express* ran a story about Mailer's time in Rome. The article quoted Leone's partner, Alberto Grimaldi, who said Mailer had been living in a hotel room with an eighteen-year old girl, and had written the script on toilet paper. It was so poorly done, Grimaldi said, that no payment was warranted. Knox was furious, and grilled Grimaldi, who insisted that the magazine had made the story up. The matter

ended in a Mexican standoff, and Mailer and Norris flew home. Bogdanovich and another producer, Billy Friedkin, read the script at Mailer's request and pronounced it worthy, whereupon Mailer sued for payment. Several years later, the Italians were ordered to pay, but much of the money went to lawyers. With the help of several writers, Leone came up with a new script, and with Robert De Niro, in the lead role, *Once Upon a Time in America*, Leone's last film, was released in 1984.

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Through Mailer, Norris had gotten friendly with the wife of fashion photographer Milton Greene, who ran a Manhattan beauty shop. Amy Greene told her that if she lost 15 pounds and got a portfolio of photographs together, she would introduce her to Wilhelmina Cooper, who ran one of the leading model agencies in New York. Norris dutifully brought her weight down, and went for an interview with Wilhelmina, a tall Dutch model. "Trying not to look like a girl from Arkansas, full of foreboding about being turned down," she presented her portfolio of head shots taken in Rome, along with others by Milton Greene, who had been one of Marilyn Monroe's favorite photographers. She was accepted and began modeling right away. Mailer was pleased that she had stopped talking about going for an MFA, and had started a new career.

It was Mailer who came up with the professional name Norris Church. She first used it in a letter to him in August 1975 when she went back to Russellville to sell her house and furniture. Later, with his help, she wrote an article for *Cosmopolitan* about how she had gotten started. He liked her new name, she wrote in her memoir, and was "thrilled" that his "Henry Higgins strategy was paying off." Even with the new income, Norris had to take money from him for

expenses, especially after Matt began living with her. "In the beginning I pretended it was a loan I would pay back, but he just laughed and said don't worry about it. That was one thing about Norman, he was generous to a fault. Not only with me but with all the kids and exes." In December, Mailer wrote to Aunt Moos to tell her about "a tall lovely red-haired model whom you would find divine." The affair was over; a long-term relationship was now underway.

Through the fall, Mailer shuttled between Stockbridge and Brooklyn. He explained to Carol that he had promised Norris that he would move permanently by New Year's Eve. He spent Christmas in Stockbridge, and most of the other children visited. A few days later, he said goodbye. He told her that the relationship with her was the deepest he had ever had, but he wanted to be with Norris. "Let me have my starlet," he said. He left Carol his Porsche and borrowed her larger car. With all the children, including Maggie, Myrtle and the dog, he drove off, leaving her alone in the big house on the hill. At the beginning of the year, Norris moved into Mailer's apartment. Carol was stricken. She remembered taking long rides in the country and crying as she drove.

He now steadily worked on the Egyptian novel. He found it easy to reengage, partly because of his excitement in construing the ancient civilization's carnal spirituality, partly because there was ample space for his imagination to wander among the dynasties, and partly because he was distressed with American culture. As he told Aunt Moos, the still-unnamed book "is like a good wife and I am like a drunken sea captain on a three-year cruise." His metaphor may also reflect the thinking he was doing, now that Norris had moved in, about marriage and fidelity. He wrote to Luke Breit about how he was meditating on "the possibility of committing oneself to one mate, taking the good with the bad." He had wondered if his new-found fidelity

was part of a reaction to "an entire era of narcissism which began after World War II." His early years with Norris were his most monogamous since his early years with Bea. As long as he was working on *Ancient Evenings*, he was faithful—mainly. Norris always said it was her favorite book.

While she cleaned and redecorated 142, he worked, often in a small aerie twenty feet above the apartment. In their first months together, he introduced her to his friends—~~Danz~~ Farbar, ~~Rick~~ Stratton, Hal Conrad and Mara Lynn, José and Ramona ~~Tones~~, Bob and Joanne Lucid and Doris and Dick Goodwin. In late February, he received the Gold Medal for Literature from the National Arts Club, where he was extolled by Lucid and Steven Marcus. Marcus called Mailer "a present-day Byron," which brought a few shouts of "No! No!" Lucid described his friend as "the American literary artist, who above all in these postwar years, is most profoundly involved in the destiny of his nation." Mailer may have chuckled inwardly when he heard this as he was currently trying with some success to disengage from American life, and to cease writing about himself. Falling in love with Norris was not the sole cause of this distancing, but it was a factor. His ego now needed less exercise. In his acceptance remarks, he laments the difficulties of fiction writing at present. "The nature of existence cannot be felt anymore," he said. "As novelists, we cannot locate our center of values." He echoed these remarks two months later at the National Book Awards ceremony.

William Gaddis won the fiction award in 1976 for his novel *JR*, a brilliant, nearly formless work described by one critic as a novel of "waste, flux and chaos," much in the mode of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, which won the NBA two years earlier. Entropy is abundant in both novels, and Mailer didn't care for it. (A few years later when he was asked

about Pynchon, he said he was “either a genius or vastly overrated.”) The “psychological demeanment” and “gloom” and “corruption of self” a writer must face, he said to the NBA audience, comes from maintaining that one’s “vision will possess illimitable value.” Art is the product of struggle, and great art comes from titanic struggle.

Mailer wanted his books to be the literary equivalent of Stravinsky’s “The Rite of Spring,” or Picasso’s “Guernica,” works that would change the given, alter the course of artistic history. In the early decades, he was pushing into unexplored territory—sex, violence, revolution—but in later years, he was upping the aesthetic ante, trying to reshape narrative forms in both fiction and nonfiction, while delivering to the country a deeper vision of itself. This is one of the reasons he was always unable to complete volume two of the several multi-novel schemes he laid out for himself. He conceived of vast projects that would shift consciousness, change lives, revamp narrative modes. Consequently, when the first novel in a sequence was not all he hoped it would be, he abandoned the scheme and sought a new one. For the Egyptian novel he created the largest expectations. He raised the highest bar for it, and for a decade foretold his forthcoming leap.

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Without Mailer’s knowledge, an excerpt from his commentary in *Gemini and Lust* was published in the *Los Angeles Times* at the end of March, and Miller wrote to him with thanks. The French think they are marvelous critics, Miller said, “but believe me, none that I read ever came near you for originality, muscularity or wind power.” He encouraged Mailer to keep writing, not about movie stars and boxers, but “just about yourself, “Life.” Mailer thanked him

and said that whenever he was down on himself as a novelist, he concluded, "ruefully," that his last career may be literary critic. Mailer's commentary on Miller's *oeuvre*, 88 pages of a 576-page book, is as much biography as it is literary commentary, but this is as it should be in discussing Miller, a writer who saw no distinction between fiction and memoir, and was usually the central character of his own books.

Miller's self-assurance impressed Mailer. "He has such an extravagant sense of mission that his presence is palpable," and what is on his mind at any moment is "vastly more real than any of the people who come and go in his life," a comment that could be applied to Mailer, who was similarly enraptured. Miller's lack of qualms, guilt and doubts about his genius, and his escape from his puritanical family, was the foundation of his power, although Mailer must have swallowed hard when he wrote this line: "One had to go back to Melville to find a rhetoric which could prove as noble under full sail." Yet, when one reads the passages Mailer has chosen from ten of Miller's books (for example, the opening of *Tropic of Cancer*, and his description in *Sexus* of the first time he met Mona, his second wife, June Edith Smith), the following celebration of Miller's prose does not seem exaggerated.

Miller at his best wrote a prose grander than Faulkner's, and wilder—the good reader is revolved in a farrago of light with words heavy as velvet, brilliant as gems, eruptions of thought cover the page. You could be in the vortex of one of Turner's oceanic holocausts when the sun shines in the very center of the storm. No, there is nothing like Henry Miller when he gets rolling. Men with literary styles as full as Hawthorne's appear by comparison stripped of their rich language, stripped as an AP style book; one has to take the English language back

to Marlowe and Shakespeare before encountering a wealth of imagery equal in intensity.

Miller's joyous depiction of the brute necessities of his life, and his artistic transcendence of them led Mailer to come up with a hypothetical situation (only Mailer could contrive this test). What would happen if Miller, Hemingway and Henry James had to write about a character who "entered a town house, removed his hat, and found crap on his head?" James would have been paralyzed, Mailer says, unlike Stendhal, Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky, and "Hemingway would have been bothered more than he liked," whereas "Miller bounces in the stink." If Hemingway thrived, for a time, in an earlier world of "individual effort, liquor, and tragic wounds," Miller was at home in a later one, "the big-city garbage can of bruises, migraines, static, mood chemicals, amnesia, absurd relations and cancer. Down in the sewers of existence where the cancer was being cooked, Miller was cavorting." Mailer found such cockroach vitality to be "inestimable."

When he looks at the narcissism of Miller and June, there are echoes of his "Cinnamon Brown" letter to Norris, the one in which he foresees their double selves in an upward spiral of excitement and challenge. Miller is the first American, he says, to explore "the uncharted negotiations of the psyche when two narcissists take the vow of love." The key passage not only demystifies Miller's 1600-page, three-decker novel (*Sexus*, *Nexus* and *Plexus*) about his obsessive love for June, it is also an excellent précis of Mailer's "Lipton's journal," one that tells us as much about Mailer's own inner life as anything he ever wrote:

The narcissist suffers from too much inner dialogue. The eye of one's consciousness is forever looking at one's own action. Yet these words turn us away from the psychic reality. The narcissist is not self-absorbed so much as one self is absorbed in studying the other. The narcissist is the scientist and the experiment in one. Other people exist for their ability to excite one presence or another in oneself. And are valued for that. Are even loved for that. Of course, they are loved as an actor loves an audience. Since the amount of stimulation we may offer ourselves is obviously limited, the underlying problem of the narcissist is boredom. So there are feverish and/or violent attempts to shift the given, to alter the context in which one self is forever regarding the other. It is a reason why narcissists are forever falling in and out of love, jobs, places and addictions. Promiscuity is the happy opportunity to try a new role. Vanity is the antidote to claustrophobia.

For June, "every day is a scenario," and the question of whether she loves Miller is moot; if there is a part for a lover in that day's script, she might. None of her lives are "more real to her than last year's role for an actor." Her repertoire keeps Miller on the balls of his feet for 30 years, trying to understand and to play opposite. "To be living as a detective one day and as a criminal the next is to keep one's interest in one's own personality alive."

Mailer was looking for something close to this in his relationship with Norris. The repertoire of roles is much different, given the life circumstances and ambitions of the two couples, but the dynamics of the two relationships are damnably congruent, or so Mailer hoped. This is what Mailer means in the letter where he tells her that he loves the two ladies ensconced

in her, "because there's one of them for each of me," It will be easier, of course, if Norris develops new identities to match the mutations he will doubtless undergo. If they can make it, perhaps he will not feel compelled to improve the sarcophagus of his image in his books, not at least not as much as before they fell in love. Norris does change, and over the years of their marriage makes serious and successful attempts at modeling, acting, painting and writing, and this versatility is one of the most important reasons why she was the last Mrs. Norman Mailer. But there are others reasons, all to be explored. Mailer probably wrote his letter to Norris before writing the narcissism passage, but we can't say for sure. It is possible that he had not even read *The Rosy Crucifixion* by that time. But it doesn't matter. He had these ideas long before he took on Miller. Meeting Norris and reading Miller were double confirmation, always the best kind for him.

Mailer told Miller that he expected to be attacked by Miller's supporters and rightly so, for "putting much of myself into you. It is the technique by which I work and I've never pretended to hide it. When I wrote about Marilyn Monroe I tried to understand her with that part of her I felt was similar to myself. I've made the same attempt with you," he said, and thought he had come even closer, given their Brooklyn background, his appreciation of Miller's style, and even the similar ways their names were spelled. He added some comments about his own writing, saying he was "guessing what Egypt conceivably might be like, and for that I have a few clues," one of them being the similarity of Egyptian theology and his own. On the day of his letter, May 25, 1976, he had written 130,000 words, and had, he told Miler, 350,000 to 400,000 to go.

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✓ For sixteen years, since 1960, Mailer had written about the quadrennial political conventions, but he lacked enthusiasm for writing about ^{Sen.} ~~Senator~~ Humphrey, who was again seeking the Democratic nomination. He decided to "spend my time more profitably," as he wrote to Yamanishi, working on his novel. The advances from Little, Brown, he calculated, would exceed anything he could earn in piecemeal journalism, and he saw "a path through my financial difficulties." He had written one piece that spring, "A Harlot High and Low," which holds up for puzzled scrutiny shards of evidence pointing to the CIA's involvement in the Watergate break-in. But the piece, published in *New York*, never coheres, and resembles a pile of research notes. There were far too many tendrils of fact, rumor and supposition surrounding Watergate than could be dealt with in a 20-page magazine article. He saw that fathoming the CIA's role in American life could only be dealt with in a longer work, and he already had one massive narrative on his hands. Another reason to step away from journalism was his growing confidence about the novel. After writing hundreds of pages about Egypt, "I've finally come to a place where I think I understand what I'm up to," he told Yamanishi.

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For his first summer with Norris and the children, Mailer rented a place in Wellfleet, a short drive from Provincetown. The house was in a salt marsh on Lieutenant Island, and could only be reached at low tide, which required planning. Danielle, Betsy and Kate, who by this time Norris said saw her "as something between a girlfriend and an older sister," helped with the cooking and laundry. "Michael and Stephen "were normal rowdy boys who half loved me and half were wary of me," Norris wrote, "now that I was the figure of authority. The kids really knew after that summer that the guard had changed." The family took long hikes, went

swimming and canoeing, and occasionally went into P-Town for dinner in Mailer's old silver Porsche, dented and patched with duct tape. Carol was scheduled to visit the house and Norris remembers being nervous. Mailer had "talked about her constantly," Norris said, "and she had achieved epic status in my imagination. I knew she was a great beauty." When she arrived, Norris thought she resembled Elizabeth Taylor. They liked each other, and although there was mutual jealousy for some years, they eventually settled into a warm friendship.

That summer, Jimmy Carter of Georgia won the Democratic nomination for president in 1976, in large part by winning a large number of delegates in primaries. As a Washington outsider, he also benefitted from the angry reaction against the Watergate scandal. But, he was still a blank to a majority of Americans. Shortly after the July convention, the *New York Times Magazine* asked Mailer to profile Carter, and he accepted, traveling to Plains, Georgia. The resulting profile, which Mailer wrote in "a towering depression," was published in the *Times* on September 26. Mailer only had a few hours with the candidate, and wasted a lot of it "haranguing a future president" about "the insuperable complexities of moral examination opened by Kierkegaard," the putative benefits of the sexual revolution, and whether Carter had given much thought to "the possibility that Satanism was loose in the twentieth century." Carter smiled at these questions; he wanted to talk about politics and programs, not the affairs of the universe. Mailer left the interview with "the twice dull sense that he liked Carter more than Carter had any reason to like him." He wrote to Knox that the piece had elicited warm congratulations from many New Yorkers, and he said that the piece had helped elect Carter. Later, he thought less of it, and did not include it in his next collection of essays, *Pieces and Pontifications*.

Genius and Lust was generally ignored, especially after William Gass in the *Times Book Review* called Mailer's judgments on Miller "romantically overblown." There was little advertising and only a modest publication party. Mailer was pleased to have Norris on his arm at the party to meet friends who had yet to make her acquaintance, including his cousin Cy Rembar, Richard Poirier, Dwight and Gloria Macdonald and Clay Felker. Norris turned heads at the event, as she did at the Ali-Norton fight on September 28 at Yankee stadium. With obvious pride, Mailer wrote to a friend to say he was at the fight with "a red-headed girl six feet tall wearing a black velvet hat and a black velvet jump suit who had to be the best looking lady I've seen in four years."

In December he and Norris threw a party at the Brooklyn Heights apartment to mark the first wedding anniversary of Dick and Doris Goodwin. Norris described the party in *A Ticket to the Circus*: "The room was so packed that nobody could move. Drinks were passed overhead through the crowd, and the guests had to link arms to get their drinks to their mouths." She made a massive bowl of coleslaw, along with ham and beans and corn muffins, but most of it was untouched; drink flowed. Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, a friend of the Goodwins, came, as did Pat Lawford Kennedy, Arthur and Alexandra Schlesinger, Dick Cavett and his wife Carrie Nye, and a number of writers, including Kurt Vonnegut and his wife, photographer, Jill Krementz. Bob Dylan arrived with an entourage, but kept to himself, as Mailer later remembered. Hunter Thompson was one of the last to leave, but returned at six a.m. and asked Norris to make him eggs and bacon. She said he looked "as if his very life hinged on those eggs and bacon," and she cooked for him. He then fell asleep in the hammock under the skylight until mid-afternoon. It

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 ✓ was, in effect, Norris' coming out-party in ^{New York} NYC, and she made several friendships that lasted for years.

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At the end of the year, Herbert Mitgang profiled Mailer for the *New York Times*. Mailer told him that he was writing a multi-part novel about Egypt as he conceived it might have been three millennia earlier, and his aspiration in writing it was "to go beyond one's reach." But he had to take on other work fairly regularly, he said. "You have to keep the bread coming in." In December alone, ^{three} ~~four~~ of his smaller pieces were published: an interview with one of Nixon's top aides, John Erlichman, who was serving a prison term for his complicity in the Watergate cover-up; a preface to the memoir of Hemingway's son Gregory; and a screenplay, "Trial of the Warlock," based on the Huysmans novel, *Là-Bas*. Mailer's editor at Little, Brown was also interviewed for the Mitgang piece, and reported that Mailer was working "systematically" on the novel and had written more than 175,000 words.

Saul Bellow won the Nobel Prize in the fall of 1976, shortly after the publication of his novel, *Humboldt's Gift*, and Mailer sent him a telegram of congratulations. "To my surprise," he told Mitgang, "I felt good about Saul getting it, because he deserved it." When Meyer Levin, an old friend and the author of several long novels about Jewish-Americans, asked Mailer if Bellow was his favorite author, Mailer said no, but his congratulations had been genuine, adding, "Obviously, others also deserved it. [Henry] Miller, Nabokov, Mailer, even old rat-fuck Meyer Levin." Bellow's Nobel was another spur to Mailer's commitment to the Egyptian novel. He

wrote to Knox that he was "resisting intensely" excursions from it. "Can it be that I have at last turned a little serious?" he asked.

Robert Gorham Davis, Mailer's Harvard instructor, read the Mitgang piece and wrote to ask if it were true, that Mailer was writing about the 19th Dynasty, and the obscure pharaoh, Ramses IX. Yes, Mailer replied; he had picked this pharaoh because of "the total inventive freedom" it provided. Here, it should be said, that as Mailer's research continued, he got caught up in the life of another pharaoh, Ramses II, the most powerful and longest-ruling (67 years) of all pharaohs, and his astounding victory over the Hittites at the Battle of Kadesh, fought in 1274 B.C. on the banks of the Orontes River in what is now Syria. To accommodate his enthusiasm for the earlier Ramses (who sired over 150 children and created the colossal sculpted figures at Abu Simbel), while retaining the opening setting of the novel in the year 1130 B.C., Mailer was forced to resort to an awkward flashback, jumping back in time 150 years from the reign of Ramses IX to that of Ramses II. The bridge figure was a general of Ramses II, Menenhetet I, who had learned from a Hebrew slave how to procreate himself, again and again, allowing him to know both pharaohs. The scheme created narrative lesions that weakened the novel, but it was the only way Mailer could find to link the two pharaohs. He also told Davis that he planned to include a chapter on Moses, who purportedly lived in the reign of Ramses II (as depicted in the film, *The Ten Commandments*, with Charlton Heston as a muscular Moses and Yul Brynner as an august Ramses), although few historians believe it.

Writing to ~~Jack~~ Aldridge in January 1977, Mailer said he had written 60 new pages in two weeks. "God, Egypt is long. God, Egypt is grand," he said. Six weeks later he told Susan that the writing was going well, but the IRS was still hounding him. He sold the Stockbridge

house for \$100,000, and his net from the sale, around \$40,000, went to pay off one year's taxes. Worse, it appeared that he would also have to sell all but the top floor and the small studio on the third floor of the Brooklyn brownstone to satisfy back taxes from other years. Beverly was living with the boys in the Provincetown house, and Mailer was paying its mortgage. He told Susan that his best hope for getting out of debt was writing a book on Gary Gilmore, who was executed in Utah on January 17, 1977, the first legal execution in the U.S. in ten years. There are "plenty of pitfalls" to such a project, he said, but a very large advance and the opportunity to write about Gilmore, a man who "fascinates me out of sight," led Mailer away from the novel once again. In retrospect, the repeated breaking of his resolve seems comic, but as he said more than once, the navigator ^{welcomed} must be prepared for surprises.

Chapter 11

Death Wishes: Gilmore and Abbott

Gary Gilmore was in the news at the end of 1976. The Utah double murderer had not merely acquiesced in his death sentence. Speaking to the judge at a subsequent hearing, he said, "You sentenced me to die. Unless it's a joke or something, I want to go ahead and do it." His determination created consternation among those opposed to capital punishment, and clutchfascination among his admirers. He received over 40,000 letters during his final months, and his face was everywhere, including the cover of *Newsweek*, under the caption "Death Wish." Mailer, like half the nation, was following the story. He recalled being struck by how handsome Gilmore was in photographs. "It was an arresting face, particularly that one shot, the famous one,

of the long face," he said. Legal maneuvers followed for months, and Gilmore tried twice to commit suicide. One of these attempts led to a memorable radio report: "Dr. L. Grant

Christensen said Gilmore can leave the hospital and return to Death Row if he continues to

improve." His first suicide attempt was in tandem with that of a young woman, Nicole Baker

Barrett. "Nicole and I have known and loved each other for thousands of years," Gilmore ^{said.} told

~~Larry Schiller~~. She was young, beautiful and devoted to him. The story kept getting more engrossing.

On the day of Gilmore's execution, January 17, 1977, Mailer saw ^{Larry} Schiller on the evening news. "I could see he was going through something," Mailer said. Two days later, Molly Cook told Mailer that Schiller had called and "wants you to do some writing for him." Schiller had already done interviews with many of those involved, including over 30 hours with Gilmore, to whom he paid \$60,000 for exclusive access. In February, ^{he} Schiller sent Mailer an interview that he and Barry Farrell had done with Gilmore. It was the longest interview *Playboy*, ever published. Mailer said to himself, "This may be the best single interview of its sort I've ever read." On March 4, he and Schiller signed a contract with Warner Books for their third collaboration. It called for 80,000 words on "the life and death of Gary Gilmore," to be submitted no later than March 1978.

The \$500,000 advance for a paperback edition, divided 50-50 with Mailer, was negotiated by Schiller with Howard Kaminsky, editor-in-chief at Warner Books, which had published *Marilyn*. This money, coupled with the proceeds from the pending *1949* floors of 142 Columbia Heights, gave Mailer the wherewithal to take another Egyptian novel, and make plans to go to Utah. Little, Brown could not have

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pleased about this turn of events, not given the amount of money the firm had invested in *Ancient Evenings*. The lurid media frenzy that had surrounded Gilmore—his execution was featured on the front page of the *National Enquirer*—did little to convince Arthur H. Thornhill, Little, Brown's president, of the story's literary merits, and at first the firm turned it down. As Schiller put it in a letter to Mailer, "I do not believe that Little, Brown took the book very seriously," at least not initially. But Mailer was enthusiastic and ultimately the firm went along with the project.

The book was Schiller's idea and he would not only provide the majority of the raw material, ~~he would~~ ^{over he would also} have a hand in the book's marketing. Meredith had told him that it would be difficult to convince publishers that Mailer could and would write a narrative. None of Mailer's recent books explored large swaths of society such as found like Theodore Dreiser's 1925 novel *An American Tragedy*, a book that would become one of Mailer's models for *The Executioner's Song*. "All he does is write these 30,000-word articles for *Life* and everybody else and then turns them into books," Meredith explained. And some of them are good books, but he's not writing narratives. They're really big essays." Schiller said, "I was lost—I don't even know the difference." But he was quick to grasp it, and was careful to tell Kaminsky that Mailer intended to write a narrative, and thus the deal was struck. Mailer was unaware of this promise, and at the time had no sense of how he was going to structure the book, nor its tone, style or length. He thought he could finish it in six months.

At first, he wanted to call the book "The Saint and the Psychopath," Gilmore fit both roles perfectly, he thought. On the one hand he possessed "a deep vein of what's commonly called criminality," but he was not "an ordinary thug," Mailer said. No, he had "a quality that

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X was almost saintly. His ability to rise above his situation and regard it with detachment was "extraordinary." Initially, he thought he'd write a 20,000-word essay and "cover the biography skimpily," focusing on Gilmore's belief in karma and reincarnation. He "embodied many of the themes I'd been living with all my life," Mailer said, and ^{and} ~~was~~ ^{the} perfect character for me." He planned to scrutinize Gilmore's choices: be executed ^{and} so bolster his chance for reincarnation, or molder for thirty or forty years in prison and feel his soul slowly shrivel.

Schiller had been traveling to Utah, for interviews with everyone who knew Nicole, and then sending them to Mailer. "I'm inundating him with more and more interviews," Schiller said. "It's coming through the transom. I mean, I'm going on and on and I remember one time he does say to me, 'Stop, stop, I've got enough to write a book!' And I say, 'No, we don't have enough to tell the whole story.'" When Mailer did dig into the interviews, he recalled in 2007, he said he was "aghast because the material that was there was so rich and so deep and so full of a kind of American life that I knew only in passing from the Army, but didn't really know, and there it was." The book would have to be considerably different, and longer, than he had thought.

In late March of 1977, Nicole flew to New York with Schiller to meet Mailer. She had never been out of Utah, and they took her to Trader Vic's for lunch. Then they all went ice skating in Central Park. From the start, Mailer had seen Gilmore as "a man who was quintessentially American and yet worthy of Dostoyevsky," but when he met there was another dimension to the story, one vying for importance with Gilmore's insistence on execution. He explained her appeal to the *Washington Post*'s Kevin Bezner: "She's been injured so much by life, and at the same time she's so strong. I thought that she had such a

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life-force in her in a way, while at the same time such despair. To me, she's a heroine in the old sense. She's a protagonist." Nicole recounted her life in many long interviews. She was "probably the most open person I've ever spoken with," Schiller said, and was particularly frank about her sexual experiences, with Gilmore and others. She was sexually abused when she was not yet a teenager, and was the mother of two children before she was 19. She did not open up immediately, however. Schiller was patient.

After Gilmore's execution, Schiller got Nicole released from a mental facility and moved her, along with her children and her mother, to a beach house in Malibu. He bought her a Great Dane puppy, and paid her \$25,000 for the rights to her story. Schiller's wife Stephanie spent time with her and built a relationship. Then Schiller used the same method with her that he used with all the important characters in the book: he created what he called "a dictionary" of her life. "I listen more than I ask," he explained. "When someone starts a sentence, let them finish the sentence, let them finish the paragraph. ^{??} Never interrupt. Everyone has their story, but nobody cares to listen. Except Schiller, as Mailer explained:

Very often an hour would go by before he would ask the first question about Gary Gilmore. These people had never been interviewed before in their lives, and they were having this incredible experience of talking about themselves, and having someone truly interested, or so it seemed, in everything they had to say. And so they went on and on and on, and by the time Larry got to Gary Gilmore, they were wide open, they were ready to tell all.

Mailer knew he had to get to Utah and get the feel of the local culture and the landscape, and sit in on interviews. He also wanted to visit the Oregon prison where Gilmore had done time.

The March visit to Oregon State Prison and discussions with the warden, Wyatt Cupp was the first of a number of visits to the place where Gilmore spent many years, and it enhanced Mailer's understanding of prison life. In late May, he returned again for three weeks, and met members of Gilmore's and Nicole's families. He stayed in the motel room where Gilmore had spent the night with Nicole's sister, April, and met Gilmore's uncle, Vern Damico, and Vern's daughter Brenda Nicol, who befriended Gilmore after his release in April 1976. Norris went along with Mailer on some of his early visits to Utah, and he took her skiing. Never particularly athletic but always game, she managed, "not prettily," to get down the slopes on her first try. They had now been living together for almost a year and a half, and the Mailer clan had accepted her and her son Matt, who Mailer treated as one of his own. "Our life was coalescing," Norris said.

Confirmation can be seen in a letter Mailer wrote to Carol Holmes. She had written him about a rumor, first reported in a *New York Post* gossip column. The columnist, Tony Schwartz, thought he overheard an exchange in which Norris said that she was pregnant. Mailer wrote an angry letter to the editor denying the report, and the *Post* printed a retraction. Mailer explained all this to Holmes and added that she might not be hearing from him in the near future, but "you need not take it amiss. I certainly liked the way you looked the last time I saw you. These however are odd years for me. I'm interested at last in the most difficult venture of all, fidelity."

By this time, Norris wrote, she was handling "the minutiae" of Mailer's daily life, as well as being a stepmother for however many children were living with them. As her best friend, Aurora Huston said, "She was his practical side. He had no idea of the needs of the kids, problems with neighbors. She would tell him, 'Norman, this or that has got to be done.' She could put her foot down when she had to." She had also begun to take over the finances. Norris

and Molly Cook had not hit it off, and Mailer had become progressively unhappy with the way Cook did things, the way she scheduled his travel, for example. The sum of their differences finally led to what Mailer called in a letter "a bloody rupture." Norris took over the family finances for the remainder of their long marriage. In her memoir, she tells a story about needing something from Mailer one day early in their relationship. He was working in the studio he had begun renting, an unfurnished third-floor apartment about a block away from their apartment.

At the time I thought it was important, so I went and knocked on his door. He was not pleased. He said, 'When I'm writing, pretend I have gone to South America. What would you do if I was in South America? You have a brain. You can deal with whatever comes up.' I apologized and said, 'Okay,' and I never knocked on his door again. I realized then that he would never be a partner for me, like a lot of marriages were.

As she put it in a 2009 interview, "Norman and I had a deal. He wrote, and I did everything else."

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On August 4, the family left for Maine, Norris' first visit. She had heard about the overhanging deck at the Thomas house, and the family lore about the twenty-foot plunge into Somes Sound. A few years before, Stephen had been the first one to take it, followed by Mailer, and the following summer, Michael. Norris took a look when she arrived at the Thomas house and, "pretending to be bolder and more athletic than I was," jumped in. It was "terrifying," she said, and not just because of the height. The water temperature is shockingly cold and takes one's

breath away. Remembering the moment many years later, Mailer said, "When I saw that long-legged creature jump in, I knew I'd have to go," and "I dove in like a sack of potatoes." Norris said she earned many brownie points that day. A week or so later, she told him she was pregnant. He was "thrilled," she said.

Work on the Gilmore book progressed, but it was slow going. Plowing through a hundred-plus interviews containing "tons of scintillating details" was "a work of digestion, not erection," he told Knox. As a break from his labors that summer, Mailer began work on a baseball betting scheme. "At some point," Danielle recalled, "He said, 'I think I have a fool-proof method of guaranteeing a windfall. I think there's a correlation between the performance of players and their biorhythms.'" The fundamental (and much derided) idea of biorhythms is that all humans experience high and low points of physical, emotional, and intellectual achievement, cycles that last from 23-33 days, pulsing up and down like a roller coaster. When the three cycles of a big league pitcher crest on the same day that he is on the mound, Mailer reasoned, an extraordinary performance is likely. Bet on the team that has the greatest number of players whose cycles are peaking. So he bought baseball magazines with birth dates, Danielle said. "We would sit with our little #2 pencils and we would mark down in columns these numbers. And then he would pull out his calculator and do this complicated calculation and come up with a prediction of who would win the game. I think he was paying us like \$10 an hour—we made a lot of money. But he didn't win much." Peter Alson also remembered working on the project, and Stephen recalled that Mailer extended it to basketball and football. The bets were called in by Peter to Buzz Farbar, who was an agent for a bookie at the time. "He was a terrible gambler," Peter said.

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It was the engineer in him, he loved systems and he believed that there were ways to predict wins. I sort of loved that quality of his and got caught up in some of his more convoluted schemes. At his core, he had betting genes and he liked to gamble and devising a system gave him a rationale for doing so. The biggest flaw in his system was the calculator, which he found in a mail order catalog. There might have been something to the theory of bio-rhythms, but we were using a device that was little more than a novelty item. It was the equivalent of using a toy telescope to practice astronomy.

In a 1989 interview, Mailer explained his error: "Finally, what came to me was the realization that these guys were not bound by the past. What makes a man a good professional is he can do his work on a bad day." The scheme "was a joke."

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Working "like a lawyer preparing briefs," through the early fall in Provincetown, Mailer accumulated over 2000 pages of notes on Schiller's interviews. He also traveled again to Utah to do more interviews. On some of these trips, he and Schiller went again to Oregon to learn more about Gilmore's time in prison there. Bessie Gilmore lived in trailer in Milwaukie, south of Portland, and he and Schiller knocked on her door several times, but she refused to let them in. "No, no, no, don't bother me, you don't need me," she told them. The last time they tried, it was pouring rain, Schiller recalled.

And Norman's sitting in the car. He's mad at me, and I said, 'Norman, we got to do this. I go knock on the door'—same response. I say, 'It's raining Bessie, we're

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out here in the goddamn rain. Norman just wants to sit and talk to you.' 'No, no, no.' And if my memory serves me right, I said, 'Bessie, Norman's got to go to the bathroom. You know, he's not a young man anymore.' 'All right,' she says, 'if he has to go to the bathroom.' She opens the door. And I make the decision not to go in. I'm not trying to make myself a hero. He's writing the book.

While Schiller sat in the car, Bessie and Mailer had a long talk, the only face-to face interview she gave, although she spoke many times on the telephone to both men. That day, Mailer asked her about the story that Harry Houdini was related to her husband Frank, but her knowledge was "second-hand and rather fanciful," Mailer said, "and all I could conclude was that Houdini being the father of Gary Gilmore's father was a psychological reality in that family." Gilmore's father, who was much older than his mother, had been in show business for a time, but there was no hard evidence of a blood relationship with Houdini, who died in 1926. The fact that she would discuss this with Mailer during the visit supports Schiller's conclusion: "She loved Norman," he said.

Arranging to interview the widows of the men Gilmore killed, Colleen Jensen and Debbie Bushnell, was ^{a challenge} also difficult. Schiller didn't want to attempt to contact them until it was known that Mailer was writing the book "because I knew that the Mormons might look upon me as a negative person—the guy who paid Gilmore's family money, who's going to make a hero out of him." When Mailer's participation became public, Schiller set up a reception in Salt Lake City for the attorney general, Mormon Church officials and other leaders. Mailer was the star attraction. After that, and probably because of it, the lawyers for the victims informed Schiller that the widows had agreed to be interviewed.

Looking back, Schiller said that he was nervous, as it was the first time he and Mailer were conducting interviews as a team. But as they prepared, he saw that Mailer respected his methods enough to have him take the lead. Mailer would give a sign when he wished to ask a question; otherwise, Schiller would run the show. The separate interviews with the widows, delicate and emotion-laden, were each four hours long. When Mailer did ask a question, Schiller said, "it was so perfect and important—a question I could not have conceived of." In their later collaborations, they often fought, but for *The Executioner's Song*, at least in the early going, they worked together as smoothly as Holmes and Watson.

The interviews continued through the first half of 1978. All told, Mailer states in an afterword to the published book, there were over three hundred separate interview sessions with over 100 people. Some interviews went on for weeks. This total includes a number with lawyers involved in the case, which were conducted by Judith McNally, Molly Cook's replacement, who would work for Mailer for the next 25 years. All together, the collected transcripts came to over 15,000 pages. Mailer had more material to work with than on any previous project. In a 1980 interview with John Aldridge, Mailer said that after leaving an interview with a woman, they were driving along, Mailer recalled, "and suddenly, Schiller, who has a passion for verification, started pounding the wheel and said, 'She's lying, she's goddamn lying!'" Part of what happened was living with these interviews long enough to compare them to interviews until you felt you could decide what probably did occur in a given situation. The huge amount of testimony they collected allowed them to follow Trotsky's dictum, "Compare the lies to find the truth." Mailer was fond of quoting it.

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Schiller had always collaborated with other writers, providing raw material. But he retained the final say, and this led to a falling out with two previous collaborators, Albert Goldman and Wilfred Sheed. Goldman, who worked with him on the Lenny Bruce biography, called him a "voyeur" interested in "the *most* lurid, the *most* gross, the *most* hideous" things imaginable. Sheed, who wrote the text accompanying a collection of photographs in Schiller's *Muhammad Ali: A Portrait in Words and Photographs*, said ~~that~~ ⁴⁴ he is too unreal to hate." Barry Farrell, a much-admired journalist, was surprised when Schiller asked him to collaborate. He had just published an article for *New West* in which he said, "The man was apparently something of a carrion bird: already he'd done business with Susan Atkins [a member of Manson's gang], Marina Oswald [Lee Harvey Oswald's widow], Jack Ruby [Oswald's murderer, who gave Schiller a death-bed confession for \$4,500], Madame Nhu [wife of Ngo Dinh Nhu, brother and counselor to Ngo Dinh Diem, President of South Korea, both assassinated] and Lenny Bruce's widow." Later Schiller would be deeply involved in his own books about JonBenét Ramsey, O. J. Simpson and Russian spy Robert Hanssen. But when Farrell met him in Utah, his expectations were upended. "Schiller was always a Moriarty figure for me, an evil genius," Farrell said, but the people he spoke to in Utah turned him around. He found Schiller to be "very honest."

In return for giving an interview, Schiller often insisted that every negative in the resulting profile to be balanced by a positive. For example, he invariably asked that the book he published by celebrated photographer W. Eugene Smith, *Minamata: Words and Photos*, be cited. Smith had been attacked and almost blinded by thugs hired by the Chisso Corporation, a Japanese chemical company that had discharged methyl mercury via wastewater into Minamata Harbor. Thousands of people died or were disfigured from eating fish and shellfish from the

area. Schiller became Smith's angel and provided financial support and professional assistance so he could finish the book, one of the first photographic records of industrial pollution. Ultimately, Chisso admitted wrongdoing and paid the victims and their families over \$80 million. Schiller was also sensitive to the misery of the families of Gilmore's victims. One of the reasons that producer David Susskind did not obtain the rights to the story was that he did not insist, as Schiller did, that the victims' families be compensated. Gilmore approved of this payment, and they received \$40,000 of his \$60,000. Mailer said that Schiller reminded him of Harold Hecht, the Hollywood agent and producer who had tried and failed to make a film out of *The Naked and the Dead*. "He wanted to do good work—wanted to raise himself in the estimate of the world, not be seen as an opportunist and an operator."

Susskind's offer to Gilmore of \$150,000 far exceeded Schiller's \$60,000, and he also offered to share profits in the film he planned to make. But Schiller had made it a point to send Gilmore telegrams and books, and to meet with members of his family, including, most importantly, Vern Damico, Gilmore's uncle and appointed agent. Schiller spent time with Vern and his wife Ida, and their daughters, Brenda Nicol and Toni Gurney, sat their living rooms, and listened to their stories. He purposefully made several spelling errors in a telegram to Gilmore, which allowed the convict to feel slightly superior to him, as he took justifiable pride in his language skills. Susskind was peppering Gilmore and Damico with telephone calls from New York, and at one point said to Damico, "Any contest between me and Mr. Schiller would be like the Dallas Cowboys playing the local high school." When Schiller heard Damico repeat this line, he said, "Susskind is right, he is the Dallas Cowboys. But I'm suited up, I'm here on the playing

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field and ready to play. Where is David Susskind? I don't even see him in the stadium." Schiller won the rights.

"You have to understand," Schiller explained while in the midst of doing research and interviewing, "that when I start an endeavor I have an overall concept, okay. I'm willing to take other people's advice, but I want to be the final person to determine how my concept is represented." Working with Mailer was an exception to this rule. Schiller needed Mailer's reputation, his ability to tell a story based not only on the interviews, but also on the huge trove he had amassed of journalistic, legal and psychiatric documents associated with Gilmore's crime and death. Mailer needed Schiller's organizational abilities, his deal-making chutzpah—Mailer called him "one of the great wheeler-dealers of all time"—and his bottomless energy. He said in a letter many years later, "I owe him more than a little, because *The Executioner's Song* would never have been nearly as big, and perhaps not as good as it is, if it hadn't been for his skill in interviewing." Schiller's omnivorous information-gathering operation changed Mailer's way of writing to a degree. He had always been proud of discovering truth at the tip of his pencil, but now saw that it would not be sufficient for capturing Gilmore and Nicole. He began to see that literary imagining was more than scouring his innards for original insights and waiting for prompts from the navigator. It could be exercised in other ways. Smelting a story from a mountain of facts, factoids, perceptions, hunches and lies was one. Selecting the right narrative voice, or rediscovering one that had lain dormant for thirty years, was another.

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One of the last of Gordon Lish's accomplishments as fiction editor at *Esquire* (1969-76) was to convince Mailer to write a piece on television, "Of a Small and Modest Malignancy,

Wicked and Bristling with Dots," one that sorted through Mailer's experiences on programs going back to Mike Wallace's "Night Beat" in the late 1950s. Mailer's fight with Vidal on the Cavett show is the memoir's focal point, although Mailer also discusses a number of other programs. The essay was on the newsstands in mid-October 1977, about a week before Mailer attended a dinner party for visiting British publisher George Weidenfeld, the publisher of six of his books. The upper echelons of the New York literary and media world were also invited. Jason Epstein, editorial director at Random House, asked if Vidal, one of the firm's authors, and his partner Howard Austen could join them after dinner, and the hostess, journalist and biographer Lally Weymouth, said of course.

In her column describing the party, Liz Smith called it "one of the grandest private parties ever tossed in Manhattan." Weymouth, the daughter of *Washington Post* publisher, Katharine Graham, invited about two dozen for dinner at her East 72nd Street apartment. and fifty for drinks afterward. Her mother came, and some good friends: CBS Board Chairman William Paley,

Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, who came with architect John Warnecke, Pete Hamill, Barbara Walters, Clay Felker and his date Gail Sheehy, and literary agent Mort Janklow, who was a role in the fight after dinner. Rose and Bill Styron were there—still not speaking to Mailer. and were Lillian Hellman and Susan Sontag. Some of the others were *Rolling Stone's* Jann Wenner, Bernstein and Nora Ephron, and Atlantic Records chief, Ahmet Ertegun, who was involved in the aftermath. Governor Jerry Brown of California came, and some West Coast film people, including producer Sam Spiegel. The British Ambassador, Peter Jay (a friend of Weidenfeld's), was also in attendance.

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Before dinner, Jackie Onassis asked Mailer some questions about fighting, according to Warnecke. "Norman, who has a theory about everything, began to expound on the subject. He said, 'You must keep ice-cool.'" Vidal arrived after dinner as the guests were talking and drinking in the crowded living room. Mailer was in the kitchen, continuing his conversation with ~~Jackie~~ Onassis, when Norris told him of Vidal's arrival. He went immediately to the living room and as soon as he saw Vidal, Janklow said, "he charged." Mailer told a *Washington Post* reporter that he had "been looking for Gore for six years and last night I finally found him. When I saw Gore, I just felt like butting him in the head, so I did." Accounts vary, but it seems that Mailer threw a gin-and-tonic in his face and bounced the glass off his head. Mailer doesn't remember throwing a punch, but Vidal later told columnist Liz Smith, "Then came the tiny fist!" Janklow, who was talking to Hamill and Felker, said that Vidal "just stood there kind of frozen." Then they scuffled, with Vidal grappling Mailer's lapels, and Mailer gripping Vidal's arm so tightly that bruise marks remained for weeks. About this time, the hostess walked in from the kitchen, unhappy to see a fight at her party. "God, this is awful; somebody do something," she yelled. Clay Felker, at ringside, said, "Shut up, this fight is making your party."

Janklow grabbed Mailer, who was "flustered and genuinely angry. My interest," Janklow said, "was to separate them so it didn't degenerate into a brawl. Gore was, stunned and with his glasses askew. Then Gore's companion Howard Austen started screaming and hollering, 'Norman, you are nothing!' Norman came forward again—he's potentially dangerous—but I held him back. Gore didn't say *anything*." Sam Spiegel tried to quiet Mailer, and Vidal sat down on the couch at the other end of the room and used someone's handkerchief to clean his bloody lip. Barbara Walter said, "To me the most interesting thing was that Mailer's girlfriend, slim and

tall and wearing a Grecian dress, stood there like a white obelisk with no expression on her face
 and said nothing." ^{Jackie} ~~Mrs.~~ Onassis watched from the kitchen doorway. According to Warnecke,
 Mailer looked much the same, "taut and unruffled." At this point, Mailer said, "Howard came up
 to me and said he would fight for Gore. I said, 'My fourteen-year-old-son could take you.'
 Howard never forgave me for that remark." Shortly afterwards, Mailer approached Weymouth
 and said, "Either he goes or I go." Faced with a Hobson's choice, she did nothing and Mailer got
 ready to leave. As he and Norris were walking out, Epstein said, "Norman, grow up." Vidal
 stayed and "held court," as one guest described it.

The following day both men gave post-mortems. Mailer said that Vidal "was nothing but
 a mouth." Vidal told a reporter, "I actually feel sorry for him. After all, it's not easy being a
 failure like Norman." Straining for a clincher, Mailer said, "People will discover that Vidal is the
 Richard Nixon of the Left." Vidal's rejoinder: "Yet again, words fail Norman Mailer." Not long
 after the Weymouth party, Norris went alone to another dinner party as Mailer was in Utah.
 Someone rose and gave a toast to Mailer, after which Ahmet Ertegun gave a toast to Gore Vidal,
 who was also absent. "As one of the dinner guests recalls, 'Norris stood up and doused him with
 a whole glassful of wine right in his face. Ahmet's wife was there and they both laughed. I was
 surprised, honestly, because if someone other than Norris had done it, they wouldn't have stood
 for it.'"
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Mailer explained to Gordon Lish that even after he had excoriated Vidal in
 essay on television, he was still angry when he ran into him at Weymouth's. "Not
 I just had to trash him. I think I'd a taken a dive into cancer gulch that night if I hadn't." For her
 part, Norris wrote, she had been "horrified and helpless" watching the altercation. She and

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Mailer never could figure out why Vidal had compared Mailer to Charles Manson, she wrote, which was the root cause of the animosity. "We were never invited to Lally Weymouth's again," she said, adding that Weymouth said later that the party "probably had made her reputation as a hostess." Vidal passed over the incident in his memoir, *Palimpsest*. When he included the essay that had started the feud, retitled "Feminism and Its Discontents," in his 1993 collection, *United States: Essays, 1952-1992*, he dropped the comparison of Mailer and Manson.

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As 1977 ended, Mailer was ready, after eight months of research and several trips to Utah, to begin writing. He was still weighing titles and listed several in his early notes: "Let's Do It" [Gilmore's final words], "American Virtue," and "Violence in America: A Novel in the Life of Gary Gilmore." His titles all point to his search for Gilmore's humanity, the praiseworthy but recessive character traits—the minority within—that offset his banality and violent crimes. Shortly after the book was published, Mailer said that Gilmore was "a kind of litmus test for compassion" because he was "on the one hand despicable and detestable and, on the other, he's admirable. How are you going to swallow that?" He wanted the story to "force people to look at how narrow our concepts of human nature are."

For the book that he would eventually title *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer returned to methods used in *The Naked and the Dead*. Both are told by anonymous, omniscient narrators who wheel their perspective through a large cast of characters, range freely in time and space, and knit two major and several minor plot strands into a huge social tapestry. Given these similarities, it might seem that Mailer's decision to revert to this perspective, even after 30 years, was not unduly complicated. Yet it was. The materials for the story, covering the nine-month

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period from Gilmore's release from prison to his execution, were in hand. But Mailer was at a loss as to how to approach the story, which seemed to consist of alternating layers of complexity and simplicity, and a chain of contingencies running back 100 years, as revealed in the final sentence of the first chapter, in which Gilmore's cousin Brenda reflects on Gary flying home to Utah from St. Louis, after being released from federal prison:

With all the excitement, Brenda was hardly taking into account that it was practically the same route their Mormon great-grandfather took when he jumped off from Missouri with a handcart near to a hundred years ago, and pushed west with all he owned over the prairies, and the passes of the Rockies, to come to rest at Provo in the Mormon Kingdom of Deseret just fifty miles below Salt Lake.

Achieving this laconic, ungarnished style—Mailer described it as “a gentle voice that seems to come in from over the hill”—was no easy matter, and during Mailer's first month of writing, from mid-January to mid-February 1978, he made no bones about his difficulty. “I was paralyzed,” he said. His first attempt was to begin the narrative at one remove.

He created a character named Staunchman, “a middle-aged movie-writer whose marriage had broken up and he was living in Paris and he was miserable, just a big ungainly man with two huge suitcases, sort of a figure in the Latin Quarter and everybody would wonder, ‘What is this man with the two huge suitcases?’” ^{doing, cum 251} His baggage is filled with all the interviews and company, and he was charged with writing a novel-length treatment for a far ^{WBjr ✓} someone like Francis Ford Coppola, who said to him, “Put everything in, don't leave anything out; I want to know all about this man Gilmore before I make the movie.” ^{cum 228-51(51) (A) FIX} The director was “tired of writers who digest the food for you,” and wanted all the ingredients to make the salad

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himself. It was Mailer's intention to have Staunchman, who was also a novelist, occasionally ~~write to the director~~ ^{the director} write ~~him~~ notes such as this one, taken from Mailer's papers:

If I were not, God save us, your old college roommate able to recollect your transcendent idiocies and occasional inspirations at a time when no one apprehended that Hugh Bryan Kimber would yet be called (by a few movie critics at any rate) our American Fellini, our—these comparisons are always polar—our Bergman—truly Hugh, I can love you for hiring me when you know I hold you in less high regard than most of the world, in short, if I did not know you better than an alter ego, I would try to make a novel of these hundred interviews I have carried with me all these months.

The long letters from Staunchman to Kimber might come to 300 pages, Mailer told Mills. MBM 427

Eventually, the letters "would get into the discussion of what kind of book Mailer was probably writing" about Gilmore, and the text would segue into Mailer's Gilmore story. It was an

awkward approach. But Mailer did not immediately see that placing Staunchman as reader and the Gilmore story, using him as a sort of impresario of the voices of the world, would be a problem. In several interviews after the book was published, he talked about coming to grips with the matter. He was enamored of his "baroque" style, he recalled, and uneasy about making the switch to something simpler. It had been "so difficult," he said, "for me to arrive at my own style—after all I'd been a public writer for 10 to 12 years before I felt I'd come into my own style as such [with *Advertisements*]—I didn't start with an identity. I forged an identity."

Achieving this style was a matter of some pride because "it's not easy to master. It's not supple.

It does not adapt to everything that comes up." Indeed. For a 1,000-page saga with

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approximately 300 characters, half of whom have speaking parts, the baroque style was a dull tool.

"I was brought up not to jump from one person's mind into another," he told an interviewer. "I thought that was what poor writers did when they did not have enough imagination to find a form." Creating the intermediating Staunchman—~~who sounds like a cross~~ between Henry James and Aquarius—gave the story provenance, but did not give Mailer the span of control he needed. Finally, he decided to drop it and adopt "the shifting point of view used in the 19th-century when people believed in God and the novelist could play at being the All Knowing Supreme Deity." He had to take the leap but he felt, as he said later, as if he'd "violated the fundamental integrity of the novel." The modern novel, it should be said. Dickens and Balzac would not object. Whatever the offense to the ghosts of Conrad and Henry James, Mailer concluded that he had to "get myself knuckled down to the simple point of telling that story flatly, blankly, in the third person," returning to the omniscient point of view last used in his first novel.

"The deity," reviewer Ted Morgan notes, "orchestrates the voices, but does not join the song." Gone are the hallmarks of Mailer's rococo style, "the existential musings, the outrageous ideas, the over-characterizing." In earlier years, Mailer said, he would have been unable to relegate himself to being "nothing but a transmission belt." It was hard to silence the subjunctive selves who had voiced his anticipations, intimations, fears and, occasionally, hopes, as Mailer made clear after the fact. He surprised himself by this departure, and astounded the literary world. Habituated to his refractive presence in the nonfiction narratives of the previous dozen years, almost every one of the numerous reviewers of *Song* remarked on his conspicuous

absence, one "so pronounced," Richard Stern noted, "that it dominates the book like an empty chair at a family dinner." He calls *The Executioner's Song* "unremittingly unmailerian," and "an act of literary suicide." Stern was almost alone in this view, however. The overwhelming majority of the book's reviewers agreed that Mailer's decision to tell the story of Gilmore's final months and execution in a quiet voice from the other side of the hill demonstrated "narrative technique of real genius."

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The only thing Mailer published in 1978 was a preface to his 1944 novel, *A Transit to Narcissus*, brought out in a limited facsimile edition by his friend Howard Fertig. He accepted very few speaking engagements, and none at colleges, save a brief talk at his 35th Harvard reunion, where he was introduced as "the folk hero of our class and nation." In February, he attended a huge party in New York with friends and admirers of James Jones, who had died of congestive heart disease the previous May. The party was to celebrate the posthumous publication of the concluding novel of Jones' World War II trilogy, *Whistle*, published by Doubleday, where Gloria Jones was an editor. Jackie Onassis, also a Doubleday editor, attended the party and was quoted as saying that *Whistle* was her favorite novel by Jones. Mailer, wearing his (now tight-fitting) Angelo Litrico velvet suit, was photographed countless times by photographers during his conversation with Mrs. Onassis. Norris, who accompanied him, told reporters that she would give birth to their child in April, via natural childbirth, "and Norman plans to be in the delivery room."

Mailer had seen ~~Jones and Gloria~~ ^{Jones} only a few times since the late 1950s, and until that night had never met Jones' daughter Kaylie, who would become a novelist after college. Kaylie

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does not mention the book party in *Lies My Mother Never Told Me*, her graceful and frank memoir of her struggle to give up alcohol and become a writer, but gives an account of another meeting with Mailer in 1989. It took place at the apartment of Jean Stein, editor of the literary journal, *Grand Street*, who was a good friend of Mailer's. "He turned to me," she wrote, "and said simply, 'I loved your father. He was the best friend I ever had, and I've missed him every day of my life. Losing him was one of the worst things that ever happened to me.'" Kaylie was taken aback: "This was the tough-talking, wheedling, arrogant son of a bitch my father was so angry at all though my childhood?" Mailer went on to say that he deeply regretted his last conversation with Jones, which had taken place in Elaine's a few months before Jones died. Jones was sitting alone at the bar when Mailer walked in. Mailer said to him, half-seriously, "Let's settle this thing once and for all, Jim. Let's go outside and fight it out," which was his time-tested way of cementing a friendship, win or lose. But Jones was not up to it. "I can't Norman, I'm sick. I've got a bum heart." Mailer described to Kaylie the way Jones said it: "There was no bravado, no self-pity, no anger in his words. Just a fact, and the total exhaustion in his eyes." Mailer felt badly, and regretted his challenge. To the end of his life, he remembered this final meeting, and repeated that his friendship with Jones was the most intense of his life. Mailer told Kaylie that he would like to help her if he could. Gloria immediately proposed that he give a blurb to Kaylie's forthcoming novel about Russia, *Quite the Other Way*, and offered to give Mailer a blow job for his endorsement. Norris, who was listening to the conversation, burst out laughing, as did everyone else. Kaylie got the blurb, gratis. Mailer knew he owed something to the memory of the man he said later had "the wisdom of an elegant redneck."

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His first letter "was intense, direct, unadorned, and detached." His voice was unique, Mailer said, and he had "an eye for the continuation of his thought that was like the line a racing-car driver takes around a turn." He was also "an intellectual, a radical, a potential leader with a vision of more elevated human relations in a better world that revolution could forge."

So he has a mind like no other I have encountered. It speaks from the nineteenth century as clearly as from the twentieth. There are moments when the voice that enters your mind

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is the clear descendant of Marx and Lenin untouched by any intervention of history.

Indeed, Abbott, who is half Irish and half Chinese, even bears a small but definite resemblance to Lenin, and the tone of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov rises out of some of these pages [. . .] Freedom and justice are oxygen to Abbott.

These words came three years later as part of Mailer's introduction to Abbott's prison letters, which he helped to be published. During their early correspondence, however, Mailer was too preoccupied with Gilmore to see Abbott as more than just a fairly interesting sidebar to the story ~~he was writing~~.

From January to early May, Mailer worked almost every day in the office on the floor below his apartment. Mounds of transcripts and notes took up most of the floor space in the 8' x 12' room with a single window overlooking the Brooklyn Heights Promenade and the East River, where huge cranes loaded and unloaded freight vessels. Trucks on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway under the Promenade rattled the windows day and night. The radiator hissed and clanked. The confined space reminded him of what a prison cell was like, he said, and over the months of ten and twelve-hour days he came to understand Gilmore "as well as I know some of my ex-wives." When he came up for air to write some letters on May 10, he had 600 pages of typescript. One letter was to Abbott, whom he thanked for a tip that Warden Wyatt Cupp of Oregon State Prison was "on the take." Mailer didn't know if this latter nugget was authentic, but later learned that Schiller had left \$10,000 in an unmarked envelope on the desk of Utah State Prison Warden Sam Smith to insure access to Gilmore's execution. Abbott was the first correspondent to learn that Norris had given birth to a son on April 16. "We're calling him John Buffalo—don't ask me why, I just like the name," he wrote. A week later he wrote a long letter

to Uncle Louis and Aunt Moos in South Africa noting that the baby, looks like "a big old tomcat with a blob of a nose so that at times he bears an uncanny resemblance to W.C. Fields, but at other times looks like a leprechaun."

Louis and Moos were among the first to know the book's title. He also told them that it would be a book with "as many characters and situations and clarity of purpose, I hope, as 'The Naked and the Dead,'" ~~another indication that he had by now settled on the book's style.~~ What he was aiming for, he went on, was the deep psychology of the murderer, "which has never been touched by anyone, except for that author sitting next to God himself, old Dostoyevsky." This letter, and several others written that day, show that Mailer had now firmly decided on most of the narrative key episodes, selected his post of observation, found his voice and chosen a title. But knowing the full story, he said later, was "a hazard." When writing novels, he didn't want to know how things were going to turn out, preferring to learn as he proceeded. He wanted *The Executioner's Song* to read the same way, and was purposefully inattentive to anything but that portion of the story under construction. Being overly conversant with its future events, he said later, "would make me curve what was happening to my characters at the place where I had them." Having made the key decisions, he was now ready to pick up the pace, and not merely because of his confirmed sense of direction; he needed a new infusion of cash. He planned to work double shifts for the next three months in order to have a 1,200-page manuscript by August 1. He told Morton Yanow, a California writer with whom he had struck up a correspondence, that *Song* would be "not unlike 'In Cold Blood' except, of course, vastly different in tone but the same essential technique," that is, nothing would be imagined, but it "reads in the form of a

novel." He hoped that the similarities ended there because it would be "tedious" if his book was compared to Capote's in every review.

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More often than not, Mailer spent parts of June and July in Provincetown, and to Maine for August. This year, he stayed in New York and worked until August. To financial situation Norris was doing portraits on commission, and also teaching art class Anne's Episcopal School where Matthew attended. On weekends some of the other children ~~always~~ visited. Mailer told Louis and Moos that it is "truly a menagerie come Saturday and Sunday—the great irony is that I was never cut out for fatherhood at all." Norris handled whatever came up with the children and was "a splendid mother," he said. manuscript as it was typed by one of a half-dozen typists, including Martha became a valued helper and good friend. Judith McNally was also proving to She did research for the book while handling Mailer's literary affairs and correspondence, and like his other secretaries pitched in to help with household chores. Within a year or two, she would sign his name to letters, although she never achieved a good facsimile of his inelegant, but serviceable handwriting.

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Another assistant was Jere Herzenberg, who came to work for him at about the same time as Judith McNally. A musicologist working on a graduate degree, she began doing chapter outlines, going back to interviewees when necessary. She told Rollyson that Mailer was "meticulous on this book. If you put a fact down, you had to say what interview, what page, and you had to have it right behind the outline, footnoted." In the past, Mailer regularly read his work aloud to others, or to himself, for cadence and tone, and then made adjustments. Even his letters were done this way; when he taped them for his secretaries, he would mouth a phrase or

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sentence, and then speak it clearly as revised, mutter then utter. For *Song*, Herzenberg recalled, "he dictated just about everything into a tape recorder to get the accent and the rhythm down. I would go over the transcriptions of the tape checking for grammar and punctuation, and then he would edit the transcripts." Mailer wanted everything to be scrupulously documented, and he also wanted to capture, as far as possible, the idiolects of his huge cast of characters. As Herzenberg put it, Mailer wanted the book to be "in the voice of the people of Utah."

Before he left for Maine he wrote again to Yanow about his progress. "The manuscript will probably go on to 1400 or 1500 pages," he said. Looking ahead to the publicity he would be doing for the book, he said, "God, will I get tired of the question, 'Why did you spend so much time and space on such a man?'" This prediction would prove accurate; it was often the first question he was asked. To Abbott, who was deluging him with descriptions of prison life, he revealed that he would run out of money by the end of September, but did not feel sorry for himself because it was a situation "entirely of my own making as I was warned often enough en route as I kept getting married and divorced." He said he needed a minimum of \$250,000 a year to support his establishment. "I thought I'd be able to do the book on Gilmore in six months and gain a half year on myself." Now he predicted that it would take him until January 1979 to complete it.

Mailer appreciated Abbott's commentary on prison life because it was both detailed and analytical. He told him that he was often tempted to strike his tasks and write to him "sometimes to agree, sometimes to discuss things up a bit, for I find that our minds are similar in fascinating ways, and then diverge." The fact that they had both read *Das Kapital*, he suggested, was the reason for this convergence. Marx ~~was~~ "probably changed the way in which I express my

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 ✓ thoughts in ~~permanent fashion~~,³ he wrote, and there was no question about Abbott having "a nice sense of the dialectic." He offered to set up a correspondence between the prisoner and Malaquais, who he referred to as "fantastically intelligent," even if at 70 he had slowed down a little. Malaquais, he told Abbott, had thought a great deal about revolution and "probably hates the idea of establishment and police as much as you do." Abbott agreed, and letters between Malaquais and Abbott were soon exchanged.

Mailer took off three weeks in August and then returned to work. He wrote no letters and did little else except write. In Maine, he jogged three times a week, but back in Brooklyn he got very little exercise—he sparred with Torres, his son Michael and other friends once a week—and his weight blew up to 200. He had learned over the years that it was impossible to write and keep in good shape at the same time. He summed up his situation in a letter to a writer friend, Mary Breasted:

I work six or seven days a week don't go out, and curse my primal verbosity of mind. The worst of it is that all the people who like my other books will probably not like this one. It's not searching, but panoramic and descriptive, almost pedestrian. The materials are so godawful strong I didn't know any other way to do it. Just put it there and take people through the waxworks. It's incredible stuff, really.

He continued working through the fall, and on December 6 delivered a rough draft of 1969 double-spaced pages, as he announced to Gilmore's cousin Brenda, who he counted on to spread the word to her family.

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Norris had gotten pregnant ^{with John Borthab} in the summer of 1977 when she and Mailer were living in Provincetown at 565 Commercial Street—Beverly was away acting in Hartford. Mailer, Norris and the children drove there one night to see Beverly perform, and Norris, who was getting along fairly well with her at the time, recalls that her performance was excellent. But after her pregnancy was revealed, things changed. A photo of a very pregnant Norris appeared in *People*, and Mailer called her mortified parents in Arkansas to promise he would marry her. Towards the end of the year, he called Beverly in Provincetown and asked her to come to Brooklyn for a talk. He had been putting off asking for a divorce, but with a second child to be born out of wedlock, and obvious pressure from Norris, he was ready. Norris states in her memoir that “Beverly totally flipped out” when she was told of the pregnancy. Mailer was leaning in the window of her car on the street outside 142 Columbia Heights when she floored the gas pedal. “He said he’d pulled his head out of the car just in time to keep from being decapitated.” Beverly sued for divorce in Massachusetts in October 1978; Norris wrote, “that started a legal battle that lasted for nearly three years.”

Money was the chief contention at the trial. Both pointed to fights, lapses, indignities and infidelities, but Beverly stated publically that Mailer was a good father, and the boys moved back and forth between the parents, eventually dividing their time between when they were teenagers. Mailer had been giving her \$400 a month and paying the mortgage and taxes on 565 Commercial, but Beverly planned to move to New York to renew her acting career, and wanted more support. The brunt of her argument was that she had supported his career for six years, 1963 to 1969, during which time he had published eight major books (four of them dedicated to

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her), and won several major awards. Now it was her turn. She asked for \$1,000 a week, child support, the house in Provincetown (valued at \$135,000) and \$10,000 a year for a New York apartment. "Listen," she told *People*, "he said he was broke when I met him, and it's the same story now. Norman is a corporation. He's screaming poverty, but he makes \$347,000 a year." His response was that she was asking for \$120,000 in annual pre-tax dollars, an impossible sum, as he currently owed a total of \$400,000 to Scott Meredith, his mother and the IRS, and was making regular payments to Adele, Jeanne Campbell and Carol Stevens, who he called "my fifth wife." When asked by Beverly's lawyer if he was feeling "a sense of obligation" towards Stevens, he said, "If feelings of loyalty and tenderness are obligation, then I felt an obligation," adding, "She is a fine, unselfish woman [. . .] an artist in her field," who "is not built for rough living." He was at a loss trying to explain how various advances had been spent, or what he had done with the money from the sale of his *Village Voice* stock. "His affairs are a holy mess," Mailer's lawyer, Monroe Inker, told the judge." Mailer added, "My talent is making money, not managing it."

The trial, a miserable affair, went on for months. Details such as Mailer hitting Beverly in the face with a wet bathing suit, and Beverly calling Norris a witch when she appeared in the courtroom were reported in the *Boston Herald* and other papers. Perhaps the only moment of humor came when Mailer told the *Herald* that his fourth wife was a very talented actress. "In fact," he said, "after she testified in the divorce case I went up and spoke to her for the first time in a year. I said, 'I want to congratulate you on a fine performance. Of course, you could use somebody to write your dialogue.'" The divorce was granted on March 21, 1980 under existing

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Massachusetts law as a *decree nisi*, a provisional judgment. A six-month waiting period was required.

Judge Shirley R. Lewis granted Beverly a lump sum of \$7500 from the pending sale of the farm in Philips, Maine that Mailer owned with Dick Goodwin, and awarded her \$575 a week in alimony for seven years, plus \$200 a week in child support. He was also required to pay their tuition at the private schools they were attending and for four years of college, and to keep up health care benefits for all three. Finally, he was required to pay the premium on a \$50,000 life insurance policy on his life. But the waterfront house in Provincetown, which contained so many memories for the Mailers, was lost. Despite various attempts to save it, it was sold by the IRS for \$65,000. After a long legal struggle, Beverly was evicted.

A month after Judge Lewis' decree, Beverly decided to contest the divorce. Her lawyer said she unhappy with the settlement terms, and wanted to re-litigate the matter in a New York court. Judge Lewis rejected her appeal on September 25, and Inker told Mailer he was free to marry. His plan was to marry Carol, divorce her posthaste, and marry Norris. When Norris saw ~~him leave the house~~ on the evening of November 7 for the ceremony with Carol, she put on a "brave face," but knew "he was on his way to marry a woman he still had feeling for. (He would always have feeling for her. It was something I lived with, like arthritis)." Mailer married Carol in the chambers of Judge Shirley Fingerhood, a friend of his sister. As Norris noted, "They had written down their vows, which were on the order of, 'I want to honor the years we have spent together and the love that created this beautiful child, Maggie.'" She lay awake that night wondering if Carol would decide to remain married "and let me stew, as she had stewed for ten plus years while he was married to Beverly." Hers fears were for naught; Carol signed the

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X ✓ papers. The next day Mailer flew to Haiti for a weekend divorce. On the morning of his second marriage in four days, November 11, 1980, he was distraught when he awoke. ~~Norris asked him~~ ~~if he was okay~~. He said, "All my life, all I have ever wanted was to be free and alone in Paris." She said to him:

Look, sweetie. What would happen if you were free and alone in Paris? You'd be walking down one of the boulevards and you'd sit at a sidewalk café to have a cup of espresso. A pretty girl would walk by and you would give her one of your twenty-five cent smiles. She would smile back and stop to talk. You would invite her to sit and buy her a cup of coffee. You'd go to a museum, and then take her out to dinner. Soon she would be living with you, and then she would get pregnant, and you wouldn't be free and alone in Paris anymore, would you?

Mailer laughed, and as John Buffalo jumped into their bed, he said, "Okay. Let's go get married and legitimize this little bugger."

Calls were made to friends for the ceremony that afternoon. Pat Lawford Kennedy came with a case of champagne, and the maid of honor, Norris' friend, Jan Cushing, brought a wedding cake. Mayor Ed Koch attended with his deputy Dan Wolf, as did future mayor David Dinkins, who was the city clerk at the time and had signed their marriage license. Susan, Michael and Maggie couldn't make it, but Matt and John Buffalo, Betsy, Danielle and Kate were there, as was Stephen, the best man. Rabbi David Glazer performed the ceremony. A few others attended: Barbara and Al, Fan, Dotson Rader, José and Ramona ~~Zayas~~ and the Goodwins, who drove down from Massachusetts, and a few more. Jeffrey Michelson, who boxed with Mailer and had worked for him several years before in Provincetown, came with his girlfriend, Laura Bradley. In

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the only pictures of the event, taken by Rader, Norris looked gorgeous in her new champagne-colored satin suit. Michelson recalled that Mailer said his vows "with great theatrical diction and when he gets to the part about 'fidelity,' he drops half an octave lower, draws the word with precision and looks Norris in the eye with conviction bordering on a glare. Not a threatening glare, but a drop-dead serious, I swear-to-God, strike-me-dead glare." Norris' parents couldn't attend but were very happy that their daughter was legally wed. "I was no longer the tootsie; I was the wife," she recalled.

Undeterred by the weddings, Beverly continued her appeals. Her lawyer, Gerald L. Nissenbaum, accused Mailer of committing bigamy. "And I call it trigamy," he said, "because he's gotten married twice since his divorce" from Beverly, which because of appeals was not final, he argued. Eventually, the case went all the way to the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts, which in September 1982 decided against the fourth Mrs. Mailer in a ruling that overturned previous ruling that had allowed many divorce cases to go on interminably. It ruled that once a probate judge grants a divorce, the party seeking the divorce cannot seek dismissal merely to seek a better settlement—"forum shopping"—in another venue. The decision, in effect, rewrote the state's divorce laws going back to 1933. The *New York Times*, in a brief editorial titled "Mailer's Ring Cycle," praised him for reminding the world of the merits of marriage at a time when the institution itself was in question. "Call the novelist a matrimoniac, or call him a mensch. We call Norman Mailer a still point in a turning world." Mailer's lawyer put his own seal on the situation: "Norman Mailer won't get married again. And you can quote me on that." He was correct: Norris and Norman lived together as man and wife for one day short of 27 years.

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✓ While ^{was} ~~the~~ divorce case dragged on, Mailer was making final changes to *Song*. By the end of March the revisions were completed and the manuscript whittled it down to 1681 pages. The question of who would publish the hardback was still open. Schiller and Meredith decide to go back to Little, Brown. They didn't press for a large advance, and accepted \$25,000. As soon as it was in the hands of Ned Bradford, Mailer composed a form letter to the hundreds of people to whom he owed letters. After the salutation—"Friends, Penpals, Champions, Calumniators, and Occasional Correspondents"—he went on to announce his divorce case and the submission of a manuscript "a little short of 400,000 words." He added that it was "as long as *The Brothers Karamazov* and one-quarter as good."

He told Mort Yanow that for many years he had the leisure to explore his "states of feeling," but all he had done recently was "a lot of slogging. ~~No worse than the infantry and about as interesting.~~" The book's completion, made him feel like "a con who's counting the days since he stepped through the gate" to freedom. Louis and Moos got only a few words on the book—he told them "it reads as easily as greased peanuts. You can't stop." Most of his letter to them is given to an account of the divorce case. He compared it to "Chinese water-drop torture," but said he found it "tonic" to be "fighting Beverly for the last time." He also talked about John Buffalo, who had just turned one: "He's sturdy as hell," with "a glint of pure intelligence in his eye," that is "reminiscent, I'm afraid, of Eisenhower." Mailer was 55 when John was born, and had more opportunity and inclination to observe his qualities and quirks than any of his other children. John said that his father "never had a coach like I do." To put it bluntly, he continued, "He's my best friend." Mailer would never call John Buffalo his favorite, but the bond with his

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youngest child was strong. Mailer had also grown close to John's half-brother Matt, who had decided a few years earlier to change his last name to Mailer.

Mailer's favorite correspondent during this period was Abbott; he made his most extensive epistolary comments on *Song* in a long letter to the convict. He said he had considered incorporating some of Abbott's experience into *Gilmore*, but didn't because he wanted to exclude anything he was not certain Gilmore had felt or said. Also, he said, Gilmore did not share Abbott's Marxist-Leninist thinking. He was "a profoundly religious man with an unshakable conviction of karma" who was "softer" than Abbott, and gave "much more parley to what you would consider the enemy," that is, the prison administration. For many years, Mailer told Abbott, he had been a disciple of Jean Malaquais, but "turned away from his thought because I found it—and this word will infuriate you—unendurably arid." Entering into a genuine dialogue with Abbott, he said, would depend on openness to each other's arguments. But he sensed the same granitic intellection in Abbott that he saw in Malaquais, who had harangued him the previous evening. "He said the same thing he was saying to me for twenty years," he told ~~Abbott~~ ^{said}. Finally, his old mentor began to irritate him and he said: "You are like a monkey who's lost his arms and lost his legs and clings to the top branch with his teeth. You're so afraid that if you fall into the pit below, you might have to accept one spooky or divine notion of existence." Malaquais' mind was fully formed and impermeable to new ideas, Mailer believed. They remained friends, but engaged in fewer deep discussions.

Abbott told Mailer that Israel was the puppet of the capitalist democracies. Mailer replied that he was "no automatic Zionist hardon," a partisan who had the same question for all

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propositions: "Is this good for Israel?" Abbott also kept reminding Mailer that he didn't understand what a long-term convict's experience was like, and Mailer came back strong:

You the fuck don't know what it is to be a Jew. You don't know what it is to have six million of your people killed when there are only twelve million of them on earth. You don't know the profound and fundamental stunting of existence that got into the blood cells of every Jew after Hitler had done his work. It's easy for you, it's contemptuous, you say 'There's Israel doing the lackey's work for the U.S. against the bold, brave Arab nations'—who, as you know full well, have the most hideous prisons in the history of civilized existence. Yet you have your kneejerk reflexes, and one of them is up the Arabs, down the Israelis.

Mailer's stance on his Jewish identity throughout this remarkable letter is similar to Bellow's, who gave a talk in 1988 about his identity as a writer, a non-observant Jew and an American. Like Mailer, Bellow found it neither possible, nor desirable to escape from "the Jewish past—not only its often heroic suffering but also the high significance of the meaning of Jewish history." Watching the 1945 newsreels of army bulldozers pushing piles of bodies into burial pits had given Bellow "a deeply troubling sense of disgrace or human demotion," the equivalent of Mailer feeling a "profound and fundamental stunting of existence" when he and Adele had visited Buchenwald.

In later letters to Abbott, Mailer brought up the Jewish experience several times, and told him about Heinrich Graetz's *History of the Jews*, and the Talmud. Mailer owned the six volumes of the former and 26 volumes of the Soncino edition of the latter. He offered to send Abbott a

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single volume of the Talmud, saying it would take him two years to read it properly. Some years later, Abbott converted to Judaism.

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A good deal of Mailer's time during this period was spent in Boston going over the manuscript of *Song* with Little, Brown's lawyer, John Taylor "Ike" Williams. Because of the large number of living people who speak or are spoken about in *Song*, there were multiple legal issues to deal with: privacy, defamation of character, copyright, and the legality of the releases Schiller had obtained from scores of people in Utah. Williams had met Mailer once before in 1963 (at a rowdy New York party where Williams punched him in the nose—both were drunk), but he did not know Schiller. As Williams recalled:

So, here is this heavy guy with all those cameras around his neck. This was at Haussermann, Davison & Shattuck, Little, Brown's law firm. We were in this conference room which we had to ourselves for weeks. My job was to legally vet the manuscript with Norman. This guy was always popping in and out and taking pictures, and I said, 'Who the fuck is that?' Norman said, 'That's Larry Schiller. There wouldn't be any book without him.' He explained that Larry was the one who went out to Utah early on, got the rights from the Gilmore family tied up, and gathered up ~~all the~~ interviews. And Larry was the one who attended the execution. When Larry approached Norman, he already had this enormous body of material. He said to Norman, 'I just don't know how to write the narrative on this spectacular material.' I didn't really have an idea then about how important Larry was to the book. It was deserved, but at that point for Little, Brown this was

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Norman's book. Norman never said, 'You'll have to ask Larry.' Larry never sat with us. Norman had mastered the material and felt it was his book.

Williams explained that in a couple of instances minor characters were created so as to avoid potential libel issues. For example, an army buddy of Nicole's father, one who never existed, was inserted so as to avoid identifying someone who might have abused her as a child, according to hearsay.

Ned Bradford died on May 12, 1979, and another Little, Brown editor, Roger Donald, took over working with Mailer. Shortly before Bradford's death, Mailer and Schiller met with him to talk about the marketing of *Song*, which had been announced as a forthcoming nonfiction book. Schiller was worried that it would be reviewed in tandem with a forthcoming crime narrative about another real-life murderer, Charles Sobhraj, in Thomas Thompson's *Serpentine*. Tom Wolfe's book about the Mercury astronauts, *The Right Stuff*, was also to be published at the end of the year, and Wolfe, like Mailer, was writing it as a straight narrative, excluding himself. Schiller saw these developments as potentially "devastating." He told several people—not including Mailer—that if nothing changed, Mailer might be throwing away a Pulitzer. Schiller recalled the meeting: "I'm sitting with Norman and Ned Bradford at Little, Brown, and Norman X / says, Well, Ned, I'm not going to put this on the nonfiction list. It's going to go on the fiction list X / and I'm going to call it a true life novel. And of course I immediately inside myself say, Thank X / God, because a novel is never reviewed in tandem with a nonfiction book. And it won't be X / judged against *The Right Stuff*." Asked if Bradford or anyone else at the firm objected, Schiller said, "No. Ned needed a little explanation by Norman; he didn't understand it for a few moments. Norman explained to him that there are areas in which he had extrapolated. Between A

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and C he'd written B. I personally believe he never would have won the Pulitzer if it was on the nonfiction list." Schiller may have been correct. To win in nonfiction, *Song* would have to have beaten Douglas Hofstadter's *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, a classic study of cognitive science and creativity in the work of a logician, an artist and a composer. In fiction, the competition was easier. The other two contenders were Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer* and William Wharton's *Birdy*, important books, but less distinguished than *The Executioner's Song*, which is indisputably one of Mailer's half-dozen finest works, perhaps his greatest.

Mailer describes *Song* in his "Afterword" as "a factual account," one which is "as accurate as one can make it." Given the fact that the material from the transcripts, legal documents, media and psychiatric reports was not altered in any significant way, and that no one came forward later to complain that words had been put in their mouth (as they had with Capote's *In Cold Blood*), the obvious question is how could Mailer call the book a fiction, a "true life novel," as it says on the dust jacket. When asked this question by a *New York Times* reporter, Mailer admitted that his decision had caused some confusion, but defended it by noting that "nonfiction provides answers and novels illumine questions. I think my book does the latter." Readers a century from now, he continued, people who know nothing of Gilmore or Mailer, "would say, 'That's a good novel.'" He wanted the book "to read like a novel, feel like a novel, to smell like a novel":

If you feel like you're in the room with people, the events have taken place before you and you don't know what is going to happen next, and you want to know what happens next, then you're in the presence of a novel. I thought that this is what the true definition of whether something is fiction or non-fiction. I think that

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non-fiction bears the same relationship to life as vitamin pills bear to food. In non-fiction, there's a tendency to digest the material, absorb it, and return it to you as vitamin pills. The essence is gotten out of the various experiences, compressed and delivered to the reader. The reader can then digest the non-fiction and convert it back to fiction, convert it back to reality.

✓ M^{it}ailer wanted ~~to have it~~ both ways: accrue every benefit of factuality and historicity—"this really happened"—while adding fictional immediacy and interiority. ~~"what an incredible story."~~ p738

No one made too much of a fuss about his generic claim, and Mailer was fairly successful in distinguishing his "true life novel" from *In Cold Blood*, Capote's "nonfiction novel."

✓ Schiller remembers ^{ed} Mailer and Capote meeting several months before *Song* was published, when he and Mailer walked into the bar at the Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles. "Sitting there all alone at the bar is Truman Capote. Norman doesn't even notice him, but I do. And being my normal bold self I say, 'Mr. Capote, I'm a friend of Mr. Mailer's. Would you like to join us for a drink?' And he gets this twinkle in his eye and a little smile and says, 'Of course.'"

✓ ← "He sits down next to Norman, and says—I'm paraphrasing all this—'Norman, about this book you've written, it's awfully long isn't it? I hear it's very, very good. But awfully long, isn't it? It'd be nice if every once in a while you could condense something a little.' Norman says something like, 'I don't think you've ever understood anything I've written.' And Capote says, 'How could I understand it? I get lost because it's so long.' At which point there was a bit of pleasant conversation, and then Truman said, 'I've got to go. It's so

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delightful to see you, Norman.' I forget exactly how he said it, but definitely that word—delightful. ~~Schiller said.~~

In a 1983 interview with Lawrence Grobel, Capote recalled that in the introduction to his 1980 collection, *Music for Chameleons*, he had pointed out that Mailer had won several prizes and earned a great deal from his nonfiction books, "although he has always been careful never to describe them as 'nonfiction novels.' No matter; he is a good writer and a fine fellow and I'm grateful to have been of some small service to him." During a subsequent television interview with Grobel, Mailer said he ~~had said nothing about his debt to Capote because it~~ ^{didn't mention} "was so famous that you didn't have to give credit to it." Capote saw this program, and was angry. He said he had "no respect" for Mailer's book because "he didn't live through it day by day," as he had with his murderers, Perry Smith and Dick Hickock. "He didn't know Utah, he didn't know Gary Gilmore, he never even *met* Gary Gilmore," he said. Mailer's book "just really *annoyed* me." As for him calling Mailer a copycat, "Well, Norman *has* been copying me for years."

Mailer had another reason to be upset. Capote had warned Norris that it would be a mistake for her to marry Mailer, although Mailer claimed that it didn't bother him. "That was the measure of his vanity," Mailer told Plimpton. "I wasn't even furious. I was amused. I thought, 'My God! He sure doesn't understand Norris!' It reminded me of that joke: What's the epitome of vanity? Answer: It's a guy floating downstream on his back with a hard-on. He approaches a drawbridge and yells that it's got to be raised." In September 1984, two weeks after Capote died, Mailer was asked again about their tiff about acknowledging influence. He said, "I think he was terribly hurt that I didn't have some sort of dedication page in *The Executioner's Song*, which went on the order of 'If not for *In Cold Blood* . . .'" Mailer went on: "But this is all nonsense, I

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mean, we can't stand around giving credit to each other all the time." Perhaps. Yet it would have been gracious for Mailer to have included a nod to Capote in his "Afterword" to *Song*, as he had for ~~Book~~ Abbott.

Both writers acknowledged ~~owing something to~~ Lillian Ross' nonfiction narrative,

Picture: A Story About Hollywood, an account ~~about the~~ making of *The Red Badge of Courage*.

Her 1952 book is fictive, if not fiction, and uses almost ~~every~~ ^{novelistic} technique of the novel. Like *Song*

and *In Cold Blood*, it is told by an anonymous narrator, populated with real people speaking

dialogue as if they were fictional characters, has detailed settings, employs foreshadowing,

situational immediacy and so forth. This debt aside, the books of Mailer and Capote are different

~~from each other~~ in several ways. First of all, Capote's murderers were not seasoned convicts who

had served long terms like Gilmore. Second, they were ~~dullards, mainly,~~ and inarticulate by

comparison. Capote tried to make Perry Smith into a *litterateur*, but his essential banality is

apparent. Mailer said many times that the best writing in *Song* was not his, but is found in

Gilmore's letters to Nicole. He wrote her 10 or 20 pages a day for months, about 1500 pages ^{all told.}

~~written on yellow legal pads.~~ Mailer includes all or part of 58 of them, including this one:

Nothing in my experience, prepared me for the kind of honest open love you gave

me. I'm so used to bullshit and hostility, deceit and pettiness, evil and hatred.

Those things are my natural habitat. They have shaped me. I look at the world

through eyes that suspect, doubt, fear, hate, cheat, mock, are selfish and vain. All

things unacceptable, I see them as natural and have even come to accept them as

such. I look around the ugly vile cell and know that I truly belong in a place this

dank and dirty, for where else should I be? There's water all over the floor from

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the fucking toilet that don't flush right. The shower is filthy and the thin mattress they gave me is almost black, it's so old. I have no pillow. There are dead cockroaches in the corners. At nite there are mosquitos and the lite is very dim. I'm alone here with my thoughts and I can feel the oldness. Remember I told you about The Oldness? and you told me how ugly it was—the oldness, the oldness. I can hear the tumbrel wheels creek. So fucking ugly and coming so close to me. When I was a child . . . I had a nightmare about being beheaded. But it was more than just a dream. More like a memory. It brought me right out of my bed. And it was sort of a turning point in my life . . . Recently it has begun to make a little sense. I owe a debt from a long time ago.

Mailer parcels out the love letters carefully over 800 pages, from Gilmore's arrest to the day before his death. Their star-crossed love-and-death affair—few commentators fail to note the similarities to the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet—is one of the story's two keels; the other is the fierce, legal struggle that dominates the second half of the book, one side trying to halt the execution, the other trying to hasten it.

"Real life," Ivy Compton-Burnett once observed, "seems to have no plots." But as Mailer stated several times, nonfiction was much easier for him to write than fiction because journalists and historians do have some sort of a record, and usually know beforehand their characters, settings and themes; they have documents, witnesses, artifacts. Sometimes there is too little information; occasionally, there is too much. In the case of the Gilmore saga, Mailer was initially bewildered, by "trying to put people and events together. I really had to work it out by encountering a hundred names at once. It's like looking at the laid-out pieces of

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after mastering the huge cast, Mailer faced another problem. On one of their plane rides, he said to Schiller, "I have a problem with the book," After their suicide attempt, Gilmore goes back to prison and Nicole is sent to a mental institution. "Who's the character that ties these two people together?" Mailer asked. Schiller had two suggestions. The first was Tamera Smith, the *Deseret News* reporter who befriended Nicole and obtained copies of Gilmore's letters to her. But she had no personal contact with Gilmore, ~~and was ruled out~~. The second was Earl Dorius, the chief assistant to the attorney general of Utah. Mailer went to lunch with Dorius, who was then dealing with the legal situations of both Gilmore and Nicole, and then called Schiller up: "Oh, wonderful, nice guy, but he doesn't work. You don't know anything about writing books." A short while later, showing that he did know a thing or two, Schiller pointed out to Mailer that the only other person significantly involved with both Gilmore and Nicole was ~~Larry~~ ^{after the suicide attempt} Schiller.

Mailer could have cut out most of the legal and media exertions detailed in Part Two, "Eastern Voices." The first 500 pages of the book cover the period from Gilmore's release to the day that he insists that his sentence be carried out, November 1, 1976. "By that time," we are told, "Gary Gilmore was a household name to half of America." Even allowing extra space for the execution and autopsy, Mailer could have covered the final ~~two-and-half~~ months of his life in 200 pages, bringing in the book at a hefty but manageable 700 pages. But after his conversation with Schiller, he realized that Gilmore's story could not be dis severed from the stories of those who helped assemble it. Schiller "might be the only one with a realistic notion of what could happen when you died in public," as Barry Farrell observed, ~~and his experience was welded to Gilmore's.~~

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"Eastern Voices," moves deftly among the huge cast: from Gilmore to those who seek to aid or impede his effort to die, to Nicole, friends and families, prisoners (Gibbs being the most memorable), and to various members of the media—Farrell, Tamera Smith, and national figures like Jimmy Breslin, Bill Moyers, David Susskind and, at the end, Geraldo Rivera and Rupert Murdoch. At the center is Schiller, who frantically seeks to record everything. Schiller "had to obtain this story," Mailer wrote. "That was fundamental. He wanted this story from his spinal cord out." He was Gilmore's chief interviewer (they met five times in person), as well as his advisor, paymaster, salesman, media spokesman, witness to his execution, literary executor and distributor of his remains. If 300 people have speaking parts in *The Executioner's Song*, Schiller had dealings with 99% of them.

Mailer's abilities were put to the test by "Eastern Voices," not only by the increased size of his cast (169 new characters are mentioned by name) but by the nature of their relations—supportive, manipulative, parasitical, obliquely and directly opposed—with each other and with Gilmore, Nicole and Schiller. In "Eastern Voices" Mailer not only carries the story to its grim conclusion, he also doubles back, recounting the efforts of Schiller and his team to collect the information, to reassemble the pieces of the clock sorted through in Part One. Approximately 125 of the final 500 pages of the book consist of documentary material. Mailer wisely chose to include this material, without which Gilmore's legal battles and love affair would be opaque.

✓ But his decision to extend the ambit of his narrative and present a full portrait of Schiller was dictated not only by Schiller's ^{central} position, but also by Mailer's desire to give the reader something that Capote purposefully omits: the story of the story. The interviews with George Plimpton and others that Capote gave on both his personal involvement with the killers and his

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methods of research and reconstruction are at least half again as interesting as *In Cold Blood* itself, and would have been a welcome addition. He cannot be criticized for leaving out what the nineteenth century called "the love interest"—unlike Mailer, he had none—but any careful comparison of his book and Mailer's should fault the lack of reference to his emotional and extended involvement with Hickock and, especially, Smith. Mailer recognized that the other half of his story was the sharp-elbowed maneuvers of the media to gain access to Gilmore and his ~~life or death~~ legal struggle—which he won by losing his life—and that this vicious, tawdry, but equally fascinating part of the story could best be seen from the centrifugal vantage point occupied by ringmaster ~~Lawrence~~ Schiller. As Gilmore's chief observer, he provided Mailer not only with his observations of Gilmore, but with a privileged view of himself observing Gilmore. "Do you *really* want to have this story in the book?" Mailer asked Schiller, who replied, "Do what you want." As he states in his "Afterword," "Schiller stood for his portrait, and drew maps to his faults," exposing not only "the stuff of his visions but the logic of his base schemes."

Schiller realized, he said later, that by giving enough unedited material to Mailer, "I will never fucking have to worry about somebody saying that I hired Norman Mailer to write this book and he whitewashed Larry Schiller and cleaned up all the things that he was being criticized for doing to get this story." Mailer interviewed Schiller a number of times. "I held back very, very little," Schiller said "I knew I'd be helping the project," he said. Schiller's self-scrutiny is roughly equivalent to the sometimes comic, sometimes somber, generally unsparing self-portrait of Mailer in *The Armies of the Night*. Schiller was critical to the success of the book in more ways than one, and became Mailer's most important collaborator, a position he retained until Mailer's death. Real life does have plots, if you have the wit to see them.

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Mailer owed the British publisher of *Marilyn*, Hodder and Stoughton, a book, and within a week of turning in the final draft of *Song*, he began work on *Of Women and Their Elegance*, which he later described as a “fantasy autobiography” of Marilyn Monroe. Having been preoccupied with matters of veracity and documentation for over two years, Mailer was ready to give his imagination a workout, and the short novel invents several improbable episodes—some quite salacious—in Monroe’s life during the period she was married to Arthur Miller. A disclaimer accompanying an advance excerpt from the book states that the episodes “are not intended to be wholly factual representations” of Monroe’s life. He would later transform the novel into a play, “Strawhead,” which was performed at Actors Studio.

When he was finished with the 50,000-word Monroe book, he went off to Maine with Norris and the children. The summer of 1979 was their last at the Thomas house. While there he wrote to Susan, and said he had “a nice feeling” being with all the kids, especially now that he was done writing. He had written so much, he said, that “I don’t even squeeze words out of my dick no more, they come out through my elbows, and I’m probably capable of writing with my nose.” He had to take some time off, he said, or “I was going to go squeak.” *Susan about*
 ✓ *to marry* married to Marco Colodro in early 1980, and he offered to have a party for her at the Brooklyn
 ✓ apartment. He relaxed, did a series of interviews with James Atlas for a *New York Times* profile, and caught up with his correspondence.

Abbott wrote to Mailer for help; he wanted to be paroled. He asked Abbott what he should say, noting that the authorities would be unlikely to believe anything he might say about “your good character, sterling deportment” since it was obvious that they had never met. “I

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could, however, write glowingly about your literary possibilities. I did as much for [Eldridge] Cleaver years ago and it was one of the factors contributing to his release." Abbott was still nearly two years from his release, and Mailer kept up a stream of encouraging letters.

With *Song* on its way to the printer, Mailer felt relaxed enough to compose a *faux* obituary, which he published in *Boston* magazine. "Novelist Shelved," is a comic offshoot of the divorce follies in which he was engaged. "Norman Mailer passed away yesterday," it begins, "after celebrating his fifteenth divorce and sixteenth wedding. 'I just don't feel the old vim,' complained the writer recently." The piece contained a number of brief tributes from notables: Capote ("He was always so butch"); Vidal ("He had the taste of a Snopes"); Gloria Steinem ("A pity. He was getting ready to see the light"); and Warhol ("I always thought Norman kept such a low profile"). President Jimmy Carter lauded him for advancing "American book-writing and reading," and regretted that he and his wife "never did get to invite Norman Miller [sic] to the White House." Family members were not quoted, but it was reported that ~~around~~ around the deathbed were "eleven of his fifteen ex-wives, twenty-two of his twenty-four children, and five of his seven grandchildren, of whom four are older than six of their uncles and aunts." The piece became a family favorite, and John Buffalo read it at Mailer's memorial service at Carnegie Hall 29 years later.

Just before publication, with a large number of bound galleys in circulation, Mailer embarked on a publicity tour, traveling to Boston, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Ann Arbor, Salt Lake City, Los Angeles, not to mention several appearances in New York. He appeared on William Buckley's *Firing Line*, and did a two-part interview with Dick Cavett on PBS. *Song* was published in England on November 5, and Mailer flew over for three days of meetings with

reporters, who seemed as interested in his divorce case as the book. He told one British reporter that he felt it was a mistake to have called his book a "true life novel," and should have called it a "true crime novel." In later years, Mailer said more than once that he wished he had eschewed a subtitle altogether.

James Atlas' long profile of Mailer was the cover story in the *New York Times Magazine* a few weeks before *Song* was published. It was the longest biographical piece on him since Brock Brower's 1965 profile in *Life*. The cover photo of Mailer in an open-necked blue work shirt is a good one. He had lost weight after finishing the book and looks trim. The camera angle is kind to his big ears. Mailer had to like this photograph, as well as the others accompanying the profile, one of which showed him standing with Norris, looking beautiful, and Buffalo on the rocky, low-tide shore below the Thomas house in Maine. But he hated the profile, calling it, with some justice, "a defile." Atlas is vinegary throughout. He sets the tone with his opening description of what he felt was Mailer's boring reading at Harvard in the spring of 1979—there is no mention of any successful readings or talks at his alma mater or elsewhere—and continues with a catalogue of gaffes and blunders. Less attention is given to his achievements. Atlas gives a fairly brief description of *Song*—presumably the profile's *raison d'être*—and makes only a few evaluative comments. He grants that Mailer "made eloquent the sprawling cast of inarticulate characters" in the story, but says it is flawed by "his addiction to the grandiose." He dislikes the "Homeric" description of Larry Schiller, and says the book is "far too long." Atlas returns relentlessly to the question—a fair one—of whether Mailer will make good on his early promise to write the great American novel. He is not hopeful, and talks about the "shrinkage of his literary reputation," and how he "cultivates a prurient reputation." Like Jean-Jacques Rousseau,

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✓ he says, ^{he} ~~Mailer~~ is "garrulous, vain, paranoid, vengeful, incessantly self-reflective." Two weeks after the profile appeared, Mailer gave some feedback to a reporter at *New York* magazine.

✓ Atlas, he said, "merely pretended great friendship and sympathy during months of interviewing," and then went on to write a "mean-spirited" piece. ^{he} Mailer was upset with Atlas' suggestion that the only reason he had classified *Song* as a novel was "to compensate for his failure to produce the definitive work of fiction he used to boast of so tirelessly." But what ✓ angered ^{him} Mailer most was the quote he included from William Styron, who said Mailer had become "a figure of pathos." Atlas said nothing about their long-running feud, and Mailer cried ✓ foul. Many years later, when a friend showed Mailer a copy of the profile, ^{him} he said that he ✓ believed that Atlas (who he now liked) might have been given ~~some general~~ editorial direction to rough him up. Norris was still angry about Atlas saying that Mailer bored the Harvard audience. She was there, she said, and it was "not true." She recalled how she got back at him. At a party at the home of Jean Stein, not long after the profile appeared, Stein brought Atlas over to meet Norris, who was several inches taller than him. She looked right over his head and said, "Oh yes, where is he?" Norris was not all sweetness and light; she could be icy.

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✓ In his interview with ~~John~~ Aldridge about *Song*, Mailer said that for years he had been interpreting the American scene, and felt that he had "used up my audience." Now, he said, "I ^{another} want a different audience. I want those people who think I'm difficult to read." ^{CNM 266} between turning in the manuscript and publication day, he began to cast about of this new readership. Martha Thomases, who had helped type *Song*, introduced old Legs McNeil, one of the founders of *Punk* magazine, and perhaps the first to use the word

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"punk" to describe the mid-seventies rock-and-roll offshoot described as "fast, hard-edged music, typically with short songs, stripped-down instrumentation." *Punk* also took swipes at the establishment, left and right. After Gilmore's death, his final words, "Let's do it," appeared on punk musicians' T-shirts. McNeil was associated with the first major punk rock group, The Ramones, and was the manager of another, Shrapnel. He admired Mailer's writing and considered himself to be "representative of the new audience Norman hoped to reach."

✓ According to McNeil, he had been compared to Mailer in a ~~Village~~ *Village Voice* story, and people were watching when they met in Martha Thomases' kitchen. "I'm sure you've never read anything I've written, and I've never read anything you've written, so, just to set the record straight, we're even." Mailer laughed at this bluster. McNeil invited him to come to CBGB, a ✓ ~~music~~ music club in the Village where Shrapnel was doing a benefit to buy bullet-proof vests for the police. He was surprised when Mailer showed up a few nights later with "a scorching redhead," Norris. It was smoky and loud, but Mailer seemed to enjoy the scene, and later he and Norris went to a party with McNeil at Joey's Ramone's loft. Thomases recalled Mailer saying that the musicians reminded him of young boxers. Mailer took McNeil aside for a talk, and told him that "he was the Godfather and I had to listen to him because I was just like him." Two days later McNeil came to Brooklyn to interview Mailer.

When he showed up, Mailer challenged McNeil, to walk across the narrow catwalks 20 feet above the apartment floor. McNeil, who had a hangover, declined, saying, "I haven't got anything to prove." After a quick tour, they sat down for the interview, which was published in the marijuana magazine, *High Times*. Mailer touches on many topics in the interview, including Hemingway and the Women's Liberation movement, at the time staples in all of his interviews,

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but made scant comment on drugs for an interview in a magazine devoted to the topic. He does
 ✓ say that he ^{liked} punk music more than he thought he would. Perhaps the most interesting comment is
 ✓ when McNeil asks him about cancer, which Mailer calls "schizophrenia of the cells." He
 ✓ explains that when people are in a crux, ~~an existential situation~~—he uses the example of being in
 a bad place while rock-climbing—"I think we get driven very near this insanity of the mind or
 the flesh." Some people "opt for letting the mind go, other people opt for letting the body go."
 The result: schizophrenia or cancer. Mailer would present such a situation a few years later in
Tough Guys Don't Dance.

Shrapnel was invited to play at the engagement party for Susan and Marco Colodro, a
 Chilian economist, at the Mailer apartment. She remembers a huge crowd, including Woody
 Allen and Kurt Vonnegut. The band set up in the loft above and played while the guests danced
 to tunes such as "I Lost My Baby at the Siegfried Line." "Damn good song," Vonnegut said to
 the guitarist, "lots of feeling." Mailer got into a head-butting contest with Glen Buxton, another
 ✓ rocker, and later got into a wrestling match with McNeil. As the band was leaving, ~~according to~~
 ✓ ~~an account in Rolling Stone~~, Mailer pressed bottles of scotch on them. One of them said,
 "Norman, we don't know how to drink Scotch yet." Mailer replied, "Well, you'll learn, you'll
 learn." Shrapnel played at 142 a few more times, but Mailer soon drained what meanings he
 could from punk rock. McNeil would become a family friend, but there would be fewer such
 hijinks as the decade went forward. Mailer turned 57 shortly after *Song* was published.

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The Executioner's Song was reviewed as widely and as warmly as *Naked and Armies*.

✓ With the exception of negative reviews by Diane Johnson in *NYRB*, and Germaine Greer in

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Hollywood Reporter, all the major reviews were enthusiastic. The book reached number three on the *Times* best seller list, and spent longer—25 weeks—on it than any of his past or future books, excepting *Naked*. Mailer maintained the approval of his old admirers, and gained the attention of a generation too young to have protested the Vietnam War. He was awarded his second Pulitzer for *Song* (which gave him “an emotional boost,” Norris recalled), and was a finalist for both the American Book Award and the National Book Critics Award. It has never gone out of print and is probably the Mailer book most often taught in college classes—English, journalism, American studies, and criminology.

There was disagreement over the relative merits of the book's halves. Partly because of Schiller's record of recording the final moments of criminals and celebrities, partly because of the media's disinclination to read about its own avidity for the sensational, and partly because of the force of “Western Voices,” as praised by Joan Didion in the *New York Times Book Review*, “Eastern Voices” was generally less admired. As a character, Schiller failed to impress everyone. One reviewer said, “When Mailer has Schiller thinking of Gilmore's letters to Nicole, ‘must be tons of meat and potatoes in those envelopes,’ we know Mailer isn't writing about Francis of Assisi.” But another reviewer, Mailer's friend John Cheever, notes that Schiller “is offered a large sum of money for an exclusive account of the execution [\$125,000 from one of Murdoch's editors, who called him repeatedly] but he refuses money for the first time in his career and contributes a sense of decency and fitness to the narrative that is shared by the other principals.” Christopher Lehmann-Haupt found the book's finest achievement to be “a stunningly candid report on the complex, ambiguous and often-disturbing relationship that increasingly exists among the news, the newsmakers, and the reporters.”

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Didion's review, stands with Kazin's on *Armies* as one of the finest and most influential appreciations of Mailer's work. She points out that the dominant speakers in "Western Voices" are those of women, and that "Eastern Voices" is largely comprised of stories by men: "Men tend to shoot, get shot, push off, move on. Women pass down stories." She quotes ^{what} Bessie Gilmore ^{says} ~~says to herself~~ after she learns that Gary is under arrest for murder: "I am the granddaughter and great-granddaughter of pioneers on both sides. If they could live through it, I can live through it." Didion calls this "the exact litany which expresses faith in God west of the 100th meridian." Her key perception, however, is that the first half of the book, because its strongest speakers are women, is "a fatalistic drift, a tension, an overwhelming and passive rush toward the inevitable events that will end in Gary Gilmore's death." These western women do not generally "believe that events can be influenced. A kind of desolate wind seems to blow through the lives of these women." Conversely, the men of "Eastern Voices," the lawyers and reporters and prison administrators, "move in the larger world and believe that they can influence events." The contrast, she says, gives the book its immutable form, a symphony in two movements. She concludes her review: "This is an absolutely astonishing book."

Discussing Didion's characterizations of the two parts of the book, Mailer said, "Yes, she's absolutely right." But he didn't see it at the time. When he was writing "Western Voices" he was thinking of cowboy movies, and for "Eastern Voices" he had a vision of media hordes coming from New York. "I saw the first half of the book as masculine and the second half as feminine." After reading her review, however, he realized the opposite was also correct—"women playing a masculine role in the first half of the book and men playing a feminine role in the second half." It was not done intentionally, he said. "If it emerges out of something you

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haven't thought about, out of the unconscious preoccupations of your mind, where you sort of half-see what you're doing and someone else sees the other half, that's always the ideal." Years later, Mailer offered another metaphor for the navigator, which reinforces his comments on the composition of *Song*: "What I found as a writer is that signals from the unconscious are faint. It's as if you are on an outpost in the North Pole and your radio is weak and you can barely hear what people are saying."

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Two weeks after *Song* was published, Mailer flew to Illinois to give Jack Abbott a copy. He traveled via Chicago, and stayed at the Drake Hotel on Lake Michigan. When he checked in, the front desk receptionist, an attractive middle-aged woman named Eileen Fredrickson, recognized him. She asked if he would sign her copy of *Naked*, and he agreed to do so the next day when she brought it to work. The next morning, she told him that she had forgotten the book. He asked where she lived and said he'd be happy to take a cab there to sign it when she was off work. They set a time, and Eileen, who was excited, called her sister to tell her. "Be careful, he stabbed his wife," she was told, but Eileen said she wasn't worried one bit. Mailer came and stayed the night. In the morning, she recalled, "I took him back to the Drake about seven-thirty in the morning in my car. I said to him, 'Norman, just consider it a one-night stand.' The next day he called me and said, 'If I came over again it wouldn't be a one-night stand, would it?' And I said, 'No.'" The relationship they started would continue until the year he died. He called her often, sent her autographed copies of his books, and got together with her when he was in Chicago.

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J. Michael Lennon, a young professor at the University of Illinois-Springfield, had been working with Mailer to put together his latest essays and interviews for what would become *Pieces and Pontifications*, and when Mailer told him that he was coming to see Abbott, he offered to pick him up at the airport. His brother, Peter, who was familiar with southern Illinois, came along, and on November 3, 1979 they drove Mailer to the prison. Peter recalled the visit:

Over breakfast, he talked at some length about *Apocalypse Now* and how Brando personified evil in it. He said the atmosphere and combat scenes in it were the best he'd ever seen. He said he was keeping an epistolary promise by visiting Abbott. He seemed eager—not nervous, but curious about the visit. It was a half hour drive through a dense, leafless forest to the isolated maximum security Marion Federal Penitentiary. After Norman announced our arrival (by speaking into a mechanical device a few hundred yards from the walls, at which point you are surveyed from the guard towers), we parked and walked to the main entrance. Norman remarked that everything, the sky, landscape, razor wire and walls were grey and, in fact, colorless. No one liked it. Michael and I were confined to the outer hallway alongside a guard station. Norman had one hour and it was just noon. At precisely one he was back out—book in hand.

Over drinks later, he said that he liked Abbott and felt that in a few years, he might get out.

Abbott deserved a chance, he said.

Upon his return, ^{Mailer} he wrote a long letter to Abbott telling him that Cy Rembar had agreed to be his literary lawyer, and would not charge him anything "until you make some real money."

He said that he would find a way to get Abbott a copy of the book, adding that he wished the

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situation had occurred when he was still writing *Song*. "It would have given me more understanding of Gilmore's vast rage at the regulations," he wrote. "Somehow I think that the human soul is built to encounter major injustice with more equanimity than the penny varieties." The meeting in Marion was "terrific, he continued, "And if you like me, that's great, 'cause I dug you." The rest of the letter is devoted to a discussion of Abbott's writing. He said it was natural for him to write about "the journey of your soul."

It is the kind of writing which is very hard to read over long stretches when written by anyone smaller in stature than Nietzsche or Kierkegaard. And while I'd never say you cannot end up ultimately as good as them the odds are obviously not in your favor. Guys like that come along once or twice a century. In any event, I have no hesitation in suggesting, nay, recommending the following because even if it never takes hold and you don't do much with it, I think it will enrich your writing in general. And that is, I would attempt if I were you to try other forms of writing as exercises, literary exercises, and build up your skills—that is probably anathema to you—in a way parallel to the way some work out to build up their bodies.

Mailer said he suspected that Abbott would have a flair for drama. In 1987, Abbott proved him to be correct about his dramatic abilities. He wrote and published a play, "The Death of Tragedy," which seeks to exonerate him for the crime that returned him to prison three months after he was paroled.

Abbott finally got a copy of *Song*, and at the end of November sent Mailer a 56-page letter of commentary. Mailer wrote back to say that while he did not agree with everything, he

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found it to be "fascinating," especially the parallels Abbott made between *Song* and Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*. Mailer was at some pains to defend why he had not taken a position on various matters in the book. "It's the first book I've written," he wrote, "without a clear sense of what I thought and what I wanted to teach others." Abbott felt that Brenda had betrayed her cousin Gary by setting up his arrest. Mailer responded by noting that while Brenda loved Gilmore, he had killed two innocent people in two days.

She is thinking of the neighbors as well as her family. Gary could shoot the cop, Toby, her neighbor. Hurrah, say you. Horrors, says Brenda. It isn't necessarily all cowardice on her part although you will think so, and Gary as well. But she lives on the surface of society where you breathe the advantageous air. In that place, the loyalties are on the surface, to one's neighbors, to society, to the team. Horseshit, you say. And, horseshit, say I, but faintly. Because I don't know for sure anymore.

Mailer would soon find himself in a bind similar to Brenda's, torn between supporting a friend—Abbott—and condemning him for a senseless crime.

With *Song* selling briskly, Scott Meredith had been able to renegotiate the contract with Little, Brown. Mailer would now receive \$30,000 a month against the royalties for the projected three-volume novel, and by the fall of that year he had been paid close to \$100,000. This allowed him to pay off his loans to Meredith, his mother and finally get even. For the first time in a decade, he had enough money coming in on a regular basis to devote his energies on the novel. "I leave it for two years and come back," he told Mills, "and it says, 'Oh you look tired, you've been away, here let me wash your feet.'" But he saw that the patience of

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this good wife of a novel was not bottomless. "I think," he said, "I've finally got to finish the Egyptian novel." By the end of January, he had 800 pages of manuscript.

His focus was intense enough that he forgot to write a second letter for Abbott, supplying some details left out of an earlier one, to the Utah Board of Pardons. He apologized in an April 11 letter, and told Abbott not to read any "psychological substrata into all this." During a two-month burst of writing, he had failed to write a number of important letters. "I'm just not mentally coordinated enough to put a really big show on the road," he said, ~~and promised to get the letter off~~. He had delegated to Judith McNally the task of assembling Abbott's letters into a ~~longer~~ piece that might be sold to a magazine, buttressing Mailer's testimonial to the Board about Abbott's literary skills. Mailer had told Robert Silvers, co-editor of the *New York Review of Books*, about Abbott, and on June 26, the letters were published there. In his introduction, Mailer explained how he had become friendly with Abbott, recounted his decades in federal prisons, which he said had been Abbott's "secondary school, his university, his family, his culture."

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Mailer returned to Provincetown in July of 1980, his first summer visit there in three years. In August the family traveled to Maine, renting for the first time a sprawling old farmhouse on the water that belonged to the Putnam family, descendants of Rufus Griswold, the scurrilous nineteenth-century editor and anthologist who created the false legend of Edgar Allan Poe as a dipsomaniac and drug addict. Even with a household full of guests, Mailer worked a few days a week on *Ancient Evenings*. He sometimes tricked new visitors into jumping off the

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dock into the bone-chilling water. "Come on in; it's perfect," he yelled to them. Mailer loved the water, and tried to swim daily in the summer.

In the fall, back in Brooklyn, he wrote to Larry L. King about their abstemious situation—he and King had both quit drinking.

By temperament, I'm a manic-depressive, which means I enjoy the depressions if they're deep, rich, mahogany, and melancholy, almost as much as the highs. My idea how to live is to feel in one hour that one is the best damned zapped fucker in the U.S. and then spend the next day mourning the tragic depths of one's profound incompetence. I've always looked upon that as living. Now here I am, trimmed-down Norm, down to 170 from 200, able to jog two miles a day at a peppy clip, brisk and birdlike in my manner to all and sundry who greet me, slightly reminiscent of a Democratic-party equivalent to George Bush, you know, peppy.

His moods did not alternate much, he said.

I keep telling myself it's the dues I must pay, that maybe a year must go by, or two years, before the epiphanies ring in my ears once more. I don't know, Larry. You've had it a lot tougher than me, because you're a born hell-to-leather drinker, and I was just a nice Jewboy from Brooklyn who acquired the habit, but I console myself ultimately with the thought that it's curious and interesting to be without booze this long. I find my relations to everyone are as altered as they were during the period when I ran for mayor and found myself shaking hands with individuals

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whose eyes I would not normally have deigned to spit into. I'm sort of tolerant and bland and can't stand myself these days, but on the other hand, I boxed three three-minute rounds a couple of Saturdays ago.

One of the reasons Mailer stopped drinking (for eighteen months) was to channel all his energy into *Ancient Evenings*, which could no longer be shunted to a siding while he took on journalism assignments. He now had the time, strength, cash and patience to complete it. Based on numerous comments he had made in interviews, the literary world half-believed he would actually deliver it in the near future. A few hangovers ~~a month~~ would impede the steady progress he was making, not to mention the loss of brain cells. He said more than once that a night of heavy drinking cost him a lot more than boxing three rounds. Sparring once a week from 1978-82 was one of Mailer's distinct pleasures, and a welcome break from writing all day in a tiny room.

"By the time I was born," John Buffalo wrote, "boxing had become the family sport. My father and his friends, my brothers and their friends, and my cousin and his friends went to the Gramercy Gym every Saturday morning." Michael and Stephen had been boxing for years with their father, as had their cousin Peter, who was a decade older than them. From the age of three, John went along with them to the gym, where they were joined by a group of friends, including Jeffrey Michelson, editor of a porn magazine, *Puritan*, and Sal Cetrano, a poet and high school English teacher. José Torres, who had trained at Gramercy under Cus D'Amato, had a set of keys to the grimy, third-floor walk-up on East 14th Street. During the week professionals and Golden Glove contenders trained there, but on weekends it was locked up. Torres let them in, and often stayed to give free tutorials to "the raging Jews," as Mailer's amateurs called themselves. Among

the group, John Buffalo wrote, there was an understanding: "They were not there to beat the piss out of each other, but to learn a little about themselves."

Torres was the boxing advisor on a movie titled *The Main Event*, starring Ryan O'Neal and Barbara Streisand, then being filmed in New York. O'Neal was an excellent boxer, a former Golden Gloves fighter, and Torres started bringing him to the gym on Saturdays. At first O'Neal boxed with Torres, but as time passed, he began to spar serially with the Mailer crowd. Michael, who would box in Golden Gloves tournaments a couple of years later, was 16 at the time, and much lighter than O'Neal, but got in the ring with him a number of times. "He was very good and technically proficient," Michael recalled, "although like a true Irish boxer, he enjoyed taking a punch. I used to hit him at will and marveled at how easy it was to connect on him, but he would punch back and it stung." His father also liked mixing it up with O'Neal; it was a chance "to get extended in the ring," Mailer wrote in a boxing memoir, because "Ryan could be as mean as cat piss." On one occasion, O'Neal broke Cetrano's jaw. On another Saturday, as Mailer described it, O'Neal threw "cruel left hooks to the stomach until the editor collapsed, still conscious, in the middle of the second round, wholly unable to go on." Mailer, who was next up against him, saw that O'Neal had turned "angelic," a bit ashamed of what he had unleashed on Michelson, "a sweet guy, extraordinarily optimistic about life." "Feeling like an avenger," Mailer hit O'Neal with several straight rights. In their first clinch, O'Neal said, "You punch harder than anyone here." Mailer replied, "Go fuck yourself." He and O'Neal continued to box, and Mailer relished their exchanges: "It was as close as it ever came for me to gain some knowledge of how a professional might feel in a real bout for money with a hard-hearted crowd out there and the spirit of electricity in the ring lights."

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Boxing, Mailer said, is as close to chess as to football, all three requiring "discipline and intelligence and restraint." As does writing, which he often compared to boxing. In an interview shortly after Mailer's death, the British novelist Ian McEwan said of him: "Boxing and writing were wonderfully confused in his mind." McEwan may not have thought deeply about his remark, and probably is not familiar with Mailer's many utterances on the two pursuits. Take the matter of discipline. Writers and boxers who are professionals must be formidably disciplined to achieve their goals, but in one sense writing requires more because, as Mailer pointed out, "boxing has objective correlatives." Invariably, one boxer dominates the other, he continued, but with writing, "you can't tell if it's good on a given day, and you almost don't want to know." Over long years, a writer may develop the instinct to see that something is quite well done, but the chance of delusion is considerable.

There is another large difference between the two pursuits, as Mailer explained to Torres in the summer of 1973 when he traded writing and boxing lessons with him. Mailer said to him, Torres recalled, that writing was about truth but "boxing was the opposite. It's about cheating and deceiving and lying," and Mailer predicted that it would be hard for him to learn to write well after years in the ring "cheating with a jab." Writing is also a form of mendacity, it could be argued, but beneath these differences Mailer believed, was one "huge similarity," which is "this battle with yourself that goes on constantly, and this demand to get the maximum out of yourself." Both boxers and writers "have to call up something deep down in themselves in order to continue." An ambitious boxer wants his victory to be remembered for years, decades, while a writer who is serious seeks "to make a change in the history of one's time." In both boxers and

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writers, there is an inner struggle, an *intestinum bellum* between courage and resignation. "Great boxers and writers, Mailer said, "become aware that the main bout is with themselves."

Even the bodily toll, Mailer believed, was much the same for professionals in the two fields, as he said in an interview with his friend Barry Leeds. Writing a novel is hell, he said:

It's an unnatural physical activity to sit at a desk and squeeze words out of yourself. It means that you secrete various kinds of fatigues and poisons through your system that you don't get rid of easily. As you get older, it's worse. [. . .]

One of the things that characterizes almost every older fighter I've ever seen training for a fight is the depression that hangs over him and his camp because the only thing good that can come out of it is money. The rest is all a foregone conclusion. Even if he wins the fight—even if he wins it well—he's not going to get a new purchase on life out of the fight the way a young writer can decisive victory. And that's true of writing. Writers will often make g decisions—am I going to write this book or not? And at a certain point to believe that the book can be enormously important or you won't suffer that kind of self-destruction.

Consequently, both writers and fighters are often hypochondriacs. "It goes with the territory," he said.

A headache was the usual result of a day at Gramercy for Mailer, but overall it was a welcome respite from the inactivity of writing. Psychologically, it brought his two selves, or at least his "two systems of anxiety," as he put it, into some kind of "quiet balance." A couple of

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years later, when his knees started to go, "I gave it up, I eased out of it," he said, "and have never felt as virtuous since." Michelson remembers getting into the ring with Mailer just before he hung up his gloves. "I don't remember who it was," he said, "but someone at the gym asked Norman on his 59th birthday just how good a boxer he considered himself to be, and Norman came back with: 'I'm better than any other 59-year-old novelist.'"

Ψ Ψ Ψ

Immediately after their marriage, the Mailers left for England. Mailer had been offered a minor role in *Ragtime*, based on E.L. Doctorow's novel and directed by Milos Forman, who had become friendly with Mailer. Mailer played Stanford White, the flamboyant nineteenth-century architect who designed, among many other structures, Madison Square Garden. A socialite and a womanizer, he had a serious affair with actress Evelyn Nesbit, perhaps the most famous beauty of her day, when she was 16 and he was in his mid-forties. Nesbit's jealous husband, the railroad magnate, Harry K. Thaw, shot and killed him in the roof garden of Madison Square Garden in 1906. Norris got a bit part in the film as White's date, sitting next to her husband when he is shot.

The John Lennon tragedy occurred shortly after Mailer finished his stint on the film, and, retrospectively, it changed the experience for him. "The killing of John Lennon," he said, altered everything: I no longer took my movie death seriously; I had the shock of a real death going through my system. Like fifty million other people I cared about Lennon; my own concerns were put into proportion." A few years earlier Lennon and Yoko Ono had responded to Mailer's request for financial help for a Canadian drug dealer, Robert Robotham, a friend of Richard Stratton's, who had received an unconsciously long sentence for selling marijuana. Mailer

X testified at his trial. Lennon and Ono had also attended Susan and Marco's engagement party in Brooklyn earlier in the year.

Forman had offered him the role because Mailer had the same kind of status in New York in 1980 that White had in 1900. "They both had an aura of accomplishment in art and social life," Forman said. "Besides, I thought it might help me get invited to his parties." Mailer said he took the role "to satisfy my curiosity." He wanted to compare the experience of making experimental films with being in a \$20 million commercial film, this one produced for Paramount Pictures by Dino De Laurentiis. "I thought it must be wonderful being a screen actor. Much easier than staring at blank sheets of paper. I was wrong. It wasn't easy at all." But Mailer did get to meet his boyhood idol, Jimmy Cagney, who played the police commissioner in the film. He and Norris also had their honeymoon during their week in London. When Michelson asked her what sights she saw during her visit, she answered, "The ceiling of my hotel room."

X ✓ Upon his return, Mailer went on a promotional tour of four cities for *Of Woman and Their Elegance*. The book grew out of Mailer's interaction with Milton Greene, who had taken photographs of Marilyn Monroe, as well as many ~~fashion models~~ and celebrities such as Gene Kelly, Marlene Dietrich and Jimmy Durante. Mailer agreed to write a text on the photos but he didn't want to interview models. "I wanted to write about Marilyn," he said. The novella received few reviews, the majority negative, and was overshadowed by *The Executioner's Song*, which was a paperback best seller through the end of 1980.

X ✓ The national moratorium on executions ~~came to an end~~ ^{ended} with Gilmore's death, and opened a national debate on the morality of capital punishment. It was not surprising, therefore, that Walter Anderson, the new editor of *Parade* magazine, the Sunday supplement with a readership

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of 40,000,000, would contact Mailer about writing a piece on the topic. Anderson, a 34-year old, ex-Marine sergeant who had done a tour in Vietnam, was a bit apprehensive, however, because Mailer had once described involvement with the magazine as "stepping in shit." But Anderson was changing the gravitas of *Parade* by publishing writers such as Studs Terkel, David Halberstam and John Cheever. The pay was good, the size of the audience unmatched, but Mailer had questions: "Norman wrote to me about the capital punishment essay," Anderson recalled, "and said, 'You may not be comfortable with what I produce.'" Anderson replied that whatever Mailer wrote would "set the benchmark on what people will argue against." Anderson, who became a close friend and reader of Mailer's manuscripts, said the piece was "brilliantly written."

"Until Dead: Thoughts on Capital Punishment," could have been the appendage Mailer *once* considered tacking on to the end of *The Executioner's Song*. It explores the pros and cons in detail, noting that ~~Gary~~ Gilmore's insistence on being shot to death had underlined the issue "in royal blue ink." Mailer first considers the deterrence claim, and finds it to be specious. Most murders, he argues, are committed by psychopaths "in need of quick gratification. Patience is not part of their powers." Those who commit atrocities "are usually poor, raddled wretches so schizophrenic in their inmost wheels that psychiatry itself is disturbed by a look into their minds." Retribution is not something that necessarily occurs to them.

Conversely, there are crimes which "make one sick with rage"—innocent children killed in acts of mayhem, old ladies raped and tortured. Such crimes call forth "the instinct to flush it out," find a scapegoat. "Living amid all the blank walls of technology, we require a death now and again, we need to stir that foul

pot." Perhaps, he says, "we need the official bloodbath to restore ourselves to the idea that society is not only reasonable, but godlike," a point of view he immediately dubs as "cynical reasoning" and "vastly offensive." Yet, he concludes that the primitive instinct that supports capital punishment "may be one of our last defenses against the oncoming wave of the computer universe."

Anderson said that the magazine received thousands of letters on the essay. The response was so large, he believes, because Mailer's reason for supporting *some* executions "is neither vengeance nor justice. Capital punishment is a safety valve." Mailer's ambivalence on the matter, a manifestation of the clash between his left-radical and conservative selves, is instructive, and sharpens the debate. A crime committed by Jack Abbott a few months later would add another layer of complexity to the question. A month after Abbott's conviction for manslaughter, Mailer said that he had been more in favor of capital punishment "until this happened." He told Dick Cavett on PBS that he "saw a lot of ugly emotions aroused during the Abbott business that gave me a lot of food for thought."

Ψ Ψ Ψ

He might have completed *Ancient Evenings* in the summer of 1981, but Jack Abbott was paroled on June 5, 1981. Over the next eight months, the "Abbott business" would result in the death of a young actor, Richard Adan, and damage to the lives of many other people, Mailer included. His novel, which was delayed for several months, was the least of the casualties. The "Abbott business" might be said to have begun on this date, but it had a long foreground, going

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back to Abbott's out-of-wedlock birth in January 1944 (the month Mailer received his induction notice) at Camp Skeel, an army base in Michigan, to Mattie Jung, a prostitute of Chinese descent from Salt Lake City, who later committed suicide. His father was Rufus Abbott, an Irish-American soldier from Texas, reputed to have been a "short-tempered alcoholic." His son, John Henry Abbott, grew up in foster homes and detention centers, and began a run of sentences as a teenager that kept him behind bars for all but nine months of his life until age 37. His crimes included passing bad checks, robbing a bank and killing another inmate in a prison fight. Abbott was proud, violent, intransigent, and consequently spent a lot of time in solitary—14 years. An intelligent and voracious reader with an extensive vocabulary, ^{was unable to} he ~~could not~~ pronounce many words that he had never heard spoken. He called himself a "state-raised convict," and wrote that he had "high esteem" for violence. For the good convict, violence is a tool that "makes us *effective*, men whose judgment impinges on others, on the world: Dangerous killers who act alone and *without* emotion, who act with calculation and principles, to avenge themselves." But outside prison walls, he promised, it would be different. Thomas Harrison, the parole chairman ^{asked him:} ~~said,~~ "What we're interested in is your potential for hurting somebody. You say there is no such potential, is that right?" Abbott replied "No, no There won't be nothing like that."

Abbott's anger was not unusual. He had been beaten, drugged and humiliated any number of times. In the months before he was paroled, there was a prison strike at Marion, which began when an inmate threw a tray of food from his cell. Then, as alleged in a U.S. District Court suit filed by prisoners, Marion guards took prisoners one at a time, hands manacled, to a special room where they were beaten with three-foot wooden clubs. Abbott was the last one. After that, he told his sister, he expected to be killed, and became paranoiac about his situation.

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A lawyer he knew later told a reporter, "He had become deathly afraid of ending up in a cemetery plot there." It was at this point that he gave authorities the names of the strike leaders, and implicated some defense lawyers, which led to his release.

✓ Mailer, Scott Meredith, Robert Silvers of the ^{NYRB} ~~New York Review of Books~~, and Erroll McDonald, a young editor at Random House, wrote letters to the Utah Pardon Board at Abbott's request attesting to Abbott's extraordinary literary abilities (because Abbott had escaped from the Utah State Prison, he had to return there in order to be paroled). In his letter, Mailer said "I am aware of the responsibility of what I propose, ^{adding that "Abbott is in need of a} it is in the belief that Abbott is in need of a special solution that can reach out to his special abilities." Mailer later told a friend, "I didn't see how I could not help." He became Abbott's most devoted champion, although McDonald and Norris spent more time with him, and Silvers was generous to him in several ways. Random House gave Abbott a book contract and a \$12,500 advance. Mailer picked Abbott up at the airport, and insisted on carrying his bags. Then he brought him home for dinner. Norris looked down as they climbed the stairs and saw him for the first time.

He was wearing a dark blue pin-striped suit with a vest, a white shirt, and red tie, and little round glasses. It was a color Xerox of what Norman wore all the time. He came up to the door, smiled, and stuck out his hand. 'I'm Jack,' he said. He was about as tall as I am, slim, neat, and nervous. I couldn't tell what his ethnicity was. He had a slightly exotic look, with tan skin, and was much more attractive than I had anticipated. I wasn't afraid of him at all. In fact, there was something moving about him, dressed up in his Norman suit with those little glasses.

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John Buffalo showed Abbott his G.I. Joe toys and then sat down with him, Matt, and their parents for a dinner of mashed potatoes and roast chicken. Abbott had seconds and said it was the best meal of his life. Norris was saddened when she realized that what he said was probably not flattery.

For the next few weeks, Abbott came to dinner two or three times a week. He thought Norris was marvelous. Silvers recalled Abbott telling him, "She's great, she's great! She understands." He confided in her, and told her about his mother and how he had bought a new stone for her grave in Salt Lake City. Almost every day he would call her on the telephone. Mailer was at his studio down the street most of the day working on *Ancient Evenings*. Abbott asked Norris for advice on matters such as where to buy toothpaste or stamps. According to Robert Sam Anson, who wrote a long, detailed piece about him for *Life*, Abbott told her about his hopes and fears, including some unnamed women who he said "were after me." Norris said, "Don't worry, Jack. I'm not after your body; I'm after your mind," and Abbott laughed, which was "something rare for him." Norris also took him shopping at Macy's. Buying a pair of jeans was a major operation:

'Is there someone who issues them to you?' he said, eyes wide, looking at the stacks and racks of clothes.

'No. You just find your size in something you like and go try them on. Over there, in the dressing rooms.'

'You mean they let you take and try these on? With nobody watching?'

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"It was a concept he could hardly grasp," Norris said. She hesitated to get too involved with him, "but Norman had little time or inclination to go shopping with Jack, or answer his questions—there were so many."

Mailer did bring Abbott to the Salvation Army halfway house on East 3rd Street in the Bowery where he was required to live until his parole ended on August 25. On another day, he took him to the New York Public Library and showed him the *Denkmaler aus Aegypten und Aethiopia* (*Monuments of Egypt and Ethiopia*), twelve massive folio volumes created in the second half of the nineteenth century by one of the fathers of Egyptology, Karl Richard Lepsius. It is likely that Mailer showed him volume III, containing drawings of bas-reliefs of Ramses II at the Battle of Kadesh, a key episode in the then-unpublished *Ancient Evenings*. Jill Krementz, the wife of Kurt Vonnegut, took a photo, published in *People*, of Mailer and Abbott examining one of the folios.

McDonald had regular meetings with Abbott about the upcoming publication of *In the Belly of the Beast*, and was one of the few people who saw how frazzled Abbott was, especially in new social situations. As he and Abbott were about to enter the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Abbott almost lost his temper when a guard ordered him to put out his cigarette. He put it out, but glared at the guard. There were other such incidents. When Mailer appeared on the Cavett show several months later, he explained the psychology of state-raised convicts. "When you're in a jail cell, the only way you keep your head intact is to make constructions with that head, every day of your life." Creating scenarios to explain all that you observe is a critical survival tool, he said. Compounding this sense of menace is the noise in prisons. "The din is constant," Mailer said.

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In prison, every little moment is of significance. The guard who walks by who's been friendly to you every other day and suddenly he frowns at you; that means the warden has gotten down on your case. Or that some powerful prisoner is having thoughts about you. And the guard is associated with that powerful prisoner and you're getting the message. Now whether these things are true or not, it's the way people in prison tend to think, because they have nothing to divert themselves.

If there is agreement about any aspect of the "Abbott business," it is that the Bowery halfway house was one of the worst places imaginable for him to have been sent. It wasn't prison, but it was noisy, filled with parolees, and located in a tough neighborhood. There were rules and regulations to be followed, including daily face-to-face checks. At Abbott's trial, Mailer testified that he loathed living there. "Instead of unwinding him, it was tightening him up." When someone lifted a pair of his shoes, Abbott called Norris and said he was going to kill the thief. Not much later, his blue pin-stripe suit was missing, and when he called Norris, she got "the feeling of lava boiling down inside Jack." As it turned out, the director had put it away so it would not be stolen.

One night after Abbott had been in New York for about two weeks, the Mailers had a dinner party for him, inviting four close friends: Jean Malaquais and his daughter Dominique, Dotson Rader, and Pat Lawford Kennedy. Abbott was uneasy. Rader described him as "the repairman who came to fix the fridge and then was asked to stay for dinner." But Abbott knew Malaquais and agreed with his radical politics, and he had also read some of Rader's books about the anti-Vietnam War movement, so he was able to carry on a conversation. The evening fell

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apart, however, when Malaquais began criticizing the U.S. as an imperialist country. "Abbott ratcheted it up a notch, calling America a fascist hellhole run by pigs." Mailer was getting nervous, especially after Kennedy, the sister of a martyred president, got into it with Abbott. She asked him why, if he hated the country so unreservedly, he didn't leave it. He answered he would like to go to Cuba. That was sufficient, Norris said, to unhinge Kennedy. She replied, "*Cuba! Splendid, I'll buy you a ticket. One way!*" Then she and Rader left. On the way home, she told him that Abbot had a killer's eyes.

At the end of June, the Mailers went to Provincetown where they were renting a large house in the East End for a month. Abbott was invited for a long weekend. He had his own room on the water, and gazed out for hours. He had never seen the ocean before, and didn't know how to swim. The Mailers showed him around town, and he had his first ice cream cone in 30 years. Over lunch with Norris at an outdoor café on Commercial Street, he explained to her how to kill someone with a knife. "He said it should be a sharp knife, and you should put the tip between the person's second and third shirt buttons and push hard, one quick thrust. That sends the knife right into the heart, and it's over immediately." Abbott seemed to think that he was providing her with a valuable tip, she said.

Danielle was there during Abbott's visit, and her father asked her to go to the movies with him. "It never occurred to any of us that we should be afraid of him," Norris said. Danielle, 24 at the time, said she would never dream of defying her father. "He was always certain of the value of unusual experience," She and Abbott, who she described as "extremely handsome with chiseled features," walked over a mile to the theater. He was "socially unskilled, but very respectful," she said, and "seemed like a caged animal." Abbott got up four or five times during

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the show, and when he came back, "he was sniffing and snorting like he had taken cocaine." On the long, dark walk back to the East End, he talked a bit about prison, but was generally reserved. The whole experience was "unnerving," she said.

A letter from a Marion inmate, Garrett Trapnell, to novelist Peter Matthiessen had been passed on to Mailer by Bob Silvers. It stated that Abbott had given a 116-page deposition to an Assistant U. S. Attorney about lawyers sneaking in drugs to prisoners in Marion, and also that he had informed on others, breaking the code of convict solidarity. That deposition had made Abbott immediately eligible for parole. The letters of Mailer and others played only a minor role, however. The Utah Parole Board chairman was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying that "Mr. Abbott had been given psychological tests and that the results were 'consistent' with his being released." When he was in Provincetown, Anson wrote, Abbot was concerned about how Mailer now felt about him, given the information that he was a snitch. He denied, however, informing on fellow convicts, admitting only to implicating the lawyers. Mailer said he couldn't judge him. "I don't know what I would have done. I never had to spend 25 years in prison."

Abbott took the bus back to New York, and a week or so later the Mailers drove in to attend a celebratory dinner at a Greenwich Village restaurant, hosted by Jason Epstein, editorial director at Random House. Attending the event beside the Mailers were Silvers, McDonald, and novelist Jerzy Kosinski. Abbot had corresponded with Kosinski starting in 1973 when he was president of the American chapter of P.E.N, and asked that he be invited. They embraced passionately like long-lost friends. "Abbott was sort of bewildered by all this," Silvers recalled. "He was like walking in a dream, and he didn't know quite how to cope." At the end of the

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dinner, Epstein offered a toast to Abbott's literary success. On the telephone, Abbott told his sister, "These people really like me," and after a pause, "That's never happened to me before."

Norris was worried about Abbott in the heat of the city, a place "where everyone was testy, a bad combination for someone as paranoid as Jack." He called her on the phone in a state of agitation ~~over various slights, real and imagined~~, and said, "I'm going to blow, I'm going to blow." She told him to stay cool; his book would be published on July 18, and good things were in store. When David Rothenburg, executive director of The Fortune Society, which helps released prisoners, saw Abbott and Mailer on "Good Morning America," he immediately called Random House and urged them "to go slow with him on the interviews. He has to learn how to walk." Rothenburg invited Abbott to come by for help, but Abbott turned him down. Rick Stratton, who had met a few criminals in his day, advised Mailer not to get involved with Abbott. Mailer answered, "You know, that's one of the things I like about our friendship. We don't have to agree." Like everyone else, Mailer was also counting on good reviews and sales to level Abbott out. He and Abbott discussed the possibility of getting him a residency at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire. Norris summed it up, "Boy, were we naïve."

The early reviews of *In The Belly of the Beast* were enthusiastic. Abbie Hoffman, in a *Soho News* review, compared Abbott with two other writers who had taken on the prison systems of their countries, Russia's Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Argentina's Jacobo Timmerman (ironically, Mailer had recently written a letter to New York officials supporting a lesser sentence on a drug charge for Hoffman, who had been on the lam for seven years). Writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, Terrence Des Pres also summoned up the Russian gulags, describing the maximum security prisons where Abbott had grown up as "an archipelago of the

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damned." Des Pres, who had written an important work on the Holocaust death camps, described Abbot's book as "the most fiercely visionary book of its kind in the American repertoire of prison literature. *In the Belly of the Beat* is awesome, brilliant, perversely ingenuous; its impact is indelible, and as an articulation of penal nightmare it is completely compelling." Mailer spoke to Abbott on the telephone on July 17, a Friday, and told him that the Sunday review from Des Pres was going to make him a star. When Abbott went out to celebrate that night, he must have felt like Jay Gatsby when he first saw the green light on Daisy's dock. But a few hours later, and 24 hours before the Sunday *Times* containing the rave review appeared on millions of doorsteps, Abbott got into a violent disagreement in an alley beside a 24-hour restaurant, the Binibon, on the corner of Second Avenue and ^{East} 5th Street, just two blocks from the halfway house.

On that evening Abbott had gone dancing at a German beer hall with two young women, Veronique de St. Andre from France, and Susan Roxas, a Barnard College student from the Philippines, whom he had met in an East Village bar. Roxas later testified that she had seen a knife sticking out of Abbott's belt, and asked him about it. "This is a bad neighborhood," he said. After the beer hall he took them for an early morning snack at the Binibon, walking in with one on each arm at around five a.m. He had eaten there before, although there is no evidence that he knew Richard Adan, the night manager and their waiter. A 22-year old Cuban-born actor and aspiring playwright, Adan was the son-in-law of the restaurant's owner, Henry Howard, himself an actor, with credits in Living Theater productions. Abbott ordered some eggs, and while the women were looking over their menus they noticed that Abbott was having an argument with the waiter. Then he was gone.

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It is not clear why Abbott and Adan went out to the alley, but their dispute was about the rest room. Apparently, Adan said that the bathroom was for staff use only, citing insurance concerns, and Abbott didn't like the answer. It is possible that Abbott invited him outside to argue, or fight, or that Adan was attempting to calm him down, something he knew how to do, according to Bill Majeski, the New York detective who was responsible for capturing Abbott. Adan may also have been showing Abbott where he could relieve himself behind a dumpster, one located next to a wall mural honoring the slain John Lennon. An eyewitness at Abbott's trial, Wayne Larsen, said Abbott lunged at Adan, who was backing away, "with terrific velocity because his hair [Abbott's] sprung back from his head." Then he stabbed him in the chest with a knife with a four-inch blade. Larsen, a Marine veteran of Vietnam, said the blow "made a resounding impact," and then, "for emphasis, thumped his chest with both hands, which shook visibly during his testimony." Abbott then stepped back and screamed at Adan, who was trying to stanch a "canal of blood" flowing from his chest, "Mother fucker, do you still want to continue this?" Adan screamed back, "God, no. I already told you I don't." Then he walked^{out} on Second Avenue and fell, bouncing on the pavement "like a Ping-Pong ball." He died within minutes. Roxas testified that Abbott came to the door of the restaurant and shouted to her and her friend, "Let's get out of here! I just killed a man." They went outside and Abbott said, "You don't know me." Then he ran.

"By the time I got there," Majeski recalled,

there were about twenty people standing around. When I walked up to the scene the overnight detective squad was just arriving. I saw a kid lying in the street and he had this angelic look on his face. So many years later I can still see that look

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on his face. My first impression was, 'This is not a bad guy.' Clearly he was a kid. There was a flow of blood that emanated from his chest because he was stabbed in the heart. Apparently, there was a lot of blood pumped out very quickly, and there was a stream running from the middle of the sidewalk down the curb and then into the street itself, a pool of blood in the street.

At six a.m. Abbott called Mailer in Provincetown. Mailer was groggy, and Abbott said he'd call back. Abbott returned to the halfway house and was present for seven o'clock roll call. About an hour later, a security guard saw him in the lobby. Next, he went to McDonald's apartment, but McDonald didn't answer—he had a feeling it was Abbott. At eleven, Abbott kept a brunch date at the Upper East Side apartment of Jean Malaquais. "He was extremely subdued and talked, as always, about literature and his projects," Malaquais recalled. ~~Nothing was said about the stabbing.~~ Abbott left at noon.

At Port Authority in midtown, he caught a bus and for the next nine weeks eluded capture. He went south, via Chicago and Texas, to Mexico and the Guatemala border, and then to the oil fields near New Orleans. Majeski said, "I had a lot of conversations with Richard Adan's mother early on, and with his father-in-law. I kind of found myself promising the both of them, independent of each other; I promised them that I would get him. Once I made that commitment, to myself, than I couldn't let it go." He had read *In the Belly of the Beast* and realized Abbott was quite intelligent, "but not well-informed about life on the outside." He concluded that eventually Abbott would ^{ask for help from} ~~get in touch with~~ people he knew, ~~seeking aid~~, as he had only \$200 when he fled. Majeski spoke to Mailer briefly on the telephone the next day, but knew he needed to meet him in person. He called Judith who told him it was impossible for Mailer to come to New York.

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 "You know how Judith could be—very stand offish. I said, 'Unless you arrange a meeting with him I will show up and I will arrest him.' She was saying, 'You can't do that, you just can't do that.' I wasn't going to do it, but that's how I got to him." The first meeting did not go well, but Majeski was persistent and kept calling Mailer and others.

Any time I got a new lead or a suspicion as to where he was I would call them and say, 'Listen I've got information that Jack was seen in Chicago and I understand that he was trying to get in touch with you.' They say, 'Oh no, he's not trying to get in touch with me.' But a couple days later I'd talk to that same person, 'I heard he was reaching out to you.' And they say, 'Ah . . . oh no, no he didn't call.' So I knew he was. I believed that Norman was going to get contacted by Jack and he was. And later Norman did tell me he was contacted by Jack, but he didn't tell him where he ~~had~~^{was}. Norman was probably the least cooperative of all—maybe not least, but less than most. He was not a big help in telling me things verbally, but he still fell into that category of *not* telling me information. And that's fine. If Norman knew Jack was in Texas, I could still pick that up from him just like I could from all the other people.

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One of the people Abbott was calling was Scott Meredith, his agent. Meredith had the phone records. "Abbott was calling him," Majeski said, "to find out how his fucking book was selling."

Ultimately, Majeski was able not only to tell Louisiana authorities where Abbott was working, but also the alias he was using: Jack Eastman—Abbott kept his first name because it was tattooed on the fingers of his left hand. On September 23, he was captured in the oil fields. He was charged with murder upon his return, and immediately retained Ivan Fisher, a New York

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criminal defense lawyer recommended by Mailer. Abbott was put in 24-hour lockdown, solitary, because Fisher was afraid someone would kill him. Majeski and Fisher got to know each other at the ensuing trial, and they both became lifelong friends with Mailer. During the time Abbott was on the run, his book went through five printings, and the following year the paperback became a best seller. He earned approximately \$100,000 in royalties while loading and unloading trucks in the oil fields for \$4 an hour.

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On June 16, two days before the events at the Binibon, Barbara Probst Solomon flew to Provincetown to do an interview on *Ancient Evenings*, which Mailer was determined to finish that summer. She hoped to publish it in the *New York Times Magazine*. In recalling the visit, she explained her relationship with him, which went back to the fall of 1947 when she met him in Paris. "I am one of Norman's oldest friends that is still here to talk with you," she said. "I knew him from the time I was a young high-school graduate and he was not yet THE Norman Mailer." Her husband died in 1967, and shortly after that, she continued, "at a time when Mailer had broken up with Beverly, Norman and I sought each other in a more intimate way. But that was temporary. I would characterize what we had over those many years as simply a profound friendship." As they were talking in Mailer's studio on Bradford Street that Saturday, someone—a friend or perhaps one of the older children—came in and said that Jack Abbott had killed someone in New York.

It was the first time I ever saw Norman cry. He broke down, he cried, at that moment—cried for the dead student. This is not a side he often revealed. 'This is

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the worst thing,' he said. By the worst thing he meant he felt in some way responsible for the murder. And then the *Times* said to me, 'Well, put Abbott in your interview.' But my interview had been a literary interview. It actually was completed before we knew of the murder. So I said, 'Abbott happened after. You'll see when you look at it. This was a literary interview. We finished it.' The *Times* then said no. I called up Bob Silvers of the *New York Review*, and he said, 'Oh, this is not the time for a literary interview with Mailer.' So it was published in the *Boston Review* and *Pieces and Pontifications*, and other places. When I told Mailer, he said, 'Well, I'm in the outfield now.'

Writing to ~~Mike~~ Lennon on July 29, Mailer said, "I've been in a state of shock from Black Friday, i.e., early Saturday a.m. I can still hardly believe Jack did it. Your relative V.I. Lenin once said "Whom?" as a test to ask "who benefits?" when you can't figure something out. I reckon it was the devil." Norris believed that their telephones in Provincetown and Brooklyn were tapped, but Majeski said this was not the case. During this period, Mailer had nothing to say to the press. In early August they went to the Griswold place in Maine with the family. Danielle remembers that he was "extremely depressed." Unable to reach Mailer, frustrated reporters pestered Scott Meredith for a statement. Mailer's agent said that he had met Abbott "a few times after his release and he seemed a gentle, kind person." As far as Mailer was concerned, Meredith said, he was "still unwilling to talk about it. I think that unwillingness will be permanent. He's just heartsick." His first public statement came when Abbot was caught: "Jack Abbott has had one of the toughest lives I've ever encountered, and the next stage is not going to be any easier." From start to finish, Mailer did nothing to distance himself from Abbott.

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Norris first met Ivan Fisher when she and Mailer went to his office to discuss the upcoming trial. Fisher, who stands about six-foot-six and speaks in a booming voice, said, "We're going to have Jack back out on the streets before you know it. Don't worry about a thing." Norris was "flabbergasted," and replied that Abbott "is going to do this again and again if he gets out," and should be locked up permanently. "Norris was morally offended, deeply, that I actually wanted to win an acquittal for Abbott," Fisher recalled. "This set us apart instantly." Mailer, "the constant voyeur," moved his chair back, so to speak, to watch the exchange. "He loved the notion," Fisher said, "that there I was, you know, the complete counterpoint to the soul of the woman he loved most in the world." The trial began in mid-January 1982.

Fisher mounted a strong defense, reading from Abbott's book about prison-induced paranoia, and speaking emotionally about how Abbott's world view was the result of a 25-year prison education. Pounding on a table and speaking in loud tones, he said, "He went from the belly of his mother to the belly of the beast." The prosecution had a dozen witnesses who either saw Abbott stab Adan or placed him in the restaurant that morning. Abbott's claim that Adan pulled a knife, which would have made his act self-defense, convinced no one. Naomi Zack, a philosophy professor who later married Abbott, said that long after he had been convicted Abbott still asked friends to search for Adan's knife in the alley. It was "the holy grail" for him, she said. Needless to say, it was never found.

Mailer testified for 20 minutes on January 18, and described how he and Abbott had corresponded, and the letter he wrote in support of his parole. His testimony merited only a few lines in news reports. But after the proceedings were over that day, reporters surrounded him and

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he got into an impromptu discussion with them in the courthouse press room. It was a terrific mistake to take on 35 reporters, but Mailer had no calculation in his bones. He admitted that he had missed Abbott's capacity for violence, that he didn't "pay enough attention to the little warnings he gave me in a quiet little voice about how that halfway house was really getting him ready to blow." Asked what he felt about Adan's death, he said, "Richard Adan's death is an absolute tragedy. Who's pretending that it isn't? It's a hideous waste, it's a horror. The fact that Richard Adan is killed is something that the people who are closest to Abbott are going to have to live with for the rest of their lives. I mean, you can't have my blood unless you go for it, but you can have my psychic blood, because naturally, I, like many other people are upset about the death of Richard Adan." The mood shifted when Mailer said he was opposed to a lengthy sentence for Abbott. "Adan has already been destroyed," he said, "at least let Abbott become a writer." Further pressed, he said, "Putting people in prison and turning the key on them, and forgetting about them, that is the cellar, that's the ground floor of fascism. A democracy involves taking risks." This enraged the reporters. Paul Montgomery of the *Times* said that in his 25 years as a reporter, Mailer's press conference was "the worst New York press gang bang I've ever seen. Everybody went crazy at once, pushing forward."

Norris, in recalling the scene, said, "Norman was never cool under pressure, and tended to get angry and say stupid things when goaded, and the press are expert in goading." If Abbott was freed again, Mailer was asked, wouldn't he kill again? He replied, ^{"I AM that"} "I'm saying culture is worth a little risk. That's what I've been saying over and over for 30 years." Mike Pearl of the *New York Post* came back sharply: "Which elements are you willing to gamble with? Cubans? Waiters? What?" Mailer repeated himself: "Society has got to take certain risks," adding that he

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felt "very responsible" for what had happened. Things got raucous at this point, and the volume went up; insults were traded. Mailer used the phrase "scumbag journalism," and shortly after, the news conference dissolved in acrimony.

The jury was divided between those who wanted to come in with a murder verdict, and those who wanted one of manslaughter. After 15 hours of deliberation, those favoring manslaughter won. Henry Howard called the verdict "ridiculous"; Mailer called it "fair." The sentence was 15 years to life. Abbot, who had spent the previous five months in solitary reading *The Golden Bough*, Sir James George Fraser's massive compilation of religious myths and practices—Mailer owned a 12-volume set and had sent him a reprint—received the verdict with resignation. Mailer called Abbott after the verdict, and they talked about the problems state-raised convicts faced when they get out. Their conclusion was that such men "are both too strong and too weak to handle the world." When told that Henry Howard had said that his son-in-law's blood was on his hands, Mailer said, "I think he's right," and walked away.

Norris ended her account of these painful events by discussing how Mailer had "analyzed violence, studied it his whole life, played with it in his imagination." She puts his fascination with violence in the context of his writing, especially "The White Negro," and also the stabbing of Adele. From the stories he told her, she concluded that the 1960 stabbing had been a crucible, and that "he had gone through the fire and come out cleaner and forged of greater steel." She concluded, "Norman always had a huge ego; he believed he could change the course of a river by the strength of his personality." He thought Abbott could do the same, failing to understand, as she observed, that not everyone was like him.

Mailer had been pretty much been given a pass for "The Trouble," although not by himself, nor by Adele, and he knew that there would be a never-ending cost to his children, especially Danielle and Betsy. Reporters and editorial writers, pundits and writers of letters to the editor, abetted by Mailer's ill-considered and inflammatory statements about [redacted] were righteous in their comments on the Abbott business. Noting the earlier stabbing was *de rigueur*. The pieties of law and order were fingered like rosaries by op-ed writers, and Mailer was pilloried for romanticizing violence. Ronald Reagan was now president, and patriotism and the verities of home, family and flag were trumpeted. Mailer was the perfect target. The *New Republic* ran a color cover depicting Mailer and Abbott sitting at a restaurant table on which lay a bloody knife and an open handcuff. On the wall, there is a portrait of the ex-con Jean Genet and his champion Jean-Paul Sartre. Inside the magazine, James Atlas called Abbott's book "a hectic screed full of shrill political jargon," adding that it was "irresponsible" of Mailer to say that Abbott could earn a living as a writer. Louis Lapham, who remained at *Harper's* when his colleagues resigned en masse, weighed in at the *Chicago Tribune*, ^{stated} ~~noting~~ that "Mailer now endorses sociopathic killers instead of prize fighters." Lance Morrow of *Time* complained of the soft verdict Abbott had received, and suggested that Abbott and Mailer "be shackled together with molybdenum chains." In a front-page essay in the *Times Book Review*, Michiko Kakutani wrote a thoughtful, balanced piece that explored the Mailer-Abbott relationship. There was a myth at work, she wrote:

It was the myth, as Mailer puts it in his introduction, whereby 'the boldness of the juvenile delinquent grows into the audacity of the self-made intellectual.' It was

the wishful impulse to see Mr. Abbott's life as a story not just of crime and punishment, but of crime and punishment and redemption; and it was the fervently held belief that talent somehow redeems, that art confers respectability, that the act of writing can somehow transform a violent man into a philosopher of violence.

Kakutani, who would later become Mailer's critical *bête noire*, came closer than anyone else to encapsulating Mailer's unspoken assumptions about Abbott. Mailer never stopped believing that art can ennoble, and that it is possible to rise above one's errors and crimes, but the Abbott business" challenged his deepest beliefs about human nature. It forced him to recognize the folly of believing that sinners and criminals could *invariably* be saved by art, could move forward into greater humanity rather than retreating into less.

The majority of those who attacked Mailer for his espousal of Abbott made the assumption that his letter to the Utah Pardon Board was the linchpin of his release. Mailer never disputed this, even when it was convincingly shown that his testimony was only one factor, and far from the most important in the pardon board's decision. Abbott sprung himself by ratting out his fellow prisoners, as he himself later made clear in conversations with Naomi Zack. But even after friends pointed to his limited culpability, Mailer insisted it was greater. *m. B. M. 34-35* Lucid and others all tried to convince him otherwise, to no avail. Appearing after Abbott's conviction, he said, "I'm not trying to hide behind others. Or say that I wasn't the only one who got him out. I certainly was one of the two or three people who were finally instrumental in getting him out." Mailer's idea of retributive balance, karmic debt, made him

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take more blame than he was due, according to his daughter Danielle. Simply put, on some level he believed that he was atoning for another stabbing, one that took place 21 years earlier. But it was only a down payment on that huge debt.

At a Fortune Society meeting shortly after Abbott's conviction, William Styron stood up for Mailer, saying, "My heart goes out to him. I have an Abbott in my life." Styron had aided a prisoner, William Reid, who later raped a woman while on parole. Styron repeated his defense of Mailer at a P.E.N. conference, and in an essay, where he said, "Remembering one's own Elysian childhood in juxtaposition with that of Reid and Abbott, I think it is fair to say that a concern for either of those wretched felons has less to do with romanticism than with a sense of justice, and the need for seeking restitution for other men's lost childhoods." Styron's gesture led Mailer to write him a letter, his first to him since 1958. He wrote, "I just wanted to say that it was gracious of you and generous and kind of gutty to speak up for me the way you did about the Abbott business." Mailer ^{and Styron} saw Styron soon after this, and their friendship was rekindled, perhaps the only happy outcome of their attempt to help "wretched felons."

Chapter 12

Pharaohs and Tough Guys

"I had to go to Yugoslavia for some reason," Schiller said, "but on the way to Yugoslavia, I stop to see Norman in London." This was not happenstance. Schiller had purposefully flown via London instead of Frankfurt so that he could see Mailer, who was there *acting in* *Miles Forman's film*, *Ragtime*. Five months earlier, in July 1980, NBC had signed an agreement with Schiller to produce and direct a television mini-series based on *The Executioner's Song*, and had insisted that he sign Tracy Keenan Wynn to write the script. Wynn had many film and television credits, and a few years earlier had won an Emmy for his adaptation of Ernest Gaines' novel, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. "Take your four million dollars," the executives told Schiller, "and go make your film." Schiller had a problem, however.

Mailer had been his first choice, but both CBS and ABC, where Schiller had good relationships, didn't want Mailer as the writer because he had never had a script produced. Schiller then went to movie studios, and they accepted Mailer as the first draft writer (mainly because all theatrical screenplays are re-written), but they didn't think Schiller had the requisite experience to direct a feature film. "I realized then that, you know, no way was this deal ever going to be made with both of us together," Schiller said. Next, he tried NBC where the new president of the entertainment division, Brandon Tartikoff, was revamping programming and taking chances, and liked the proposed miniseries. Nick Nolte was the first choice to play Gilmore, and Priscilla Presley as Nicole (although ultimately the roles went to Tommy Lee Jones and Rosanna Arquette). Schiller called Mailer and told him that he was going with Wynn and NBC. "You've written the book and won your Pulitzer," he told Mailer, "and now it's time for me to tell the story my way." Mailer didn't argue, Schiller said.

At lunch with Mailer and Norris at Grosvenor House in December, Schiller knew Mailer would ask about Wynn's script. He said that it was a fine adaptation, but not exciting. Not much else was said, and Schiller left for Yugoslavia. In February 1981, Schiller received a new script in the mail. It was Mailer's, and he liked it enough to send it on to NBC. Mailer had no contract; his version was done on "spec." At first glance, it seemed nearly the same as Wynn's, but there were subtle changes, lines shuffled or dropped, and some additions. Schiller explained:

With every single character in Mailer's version, the dialogue defines the character. I just couldn't believe it. 'I don't give a shit about your pants'—that line defines Brenda right off the bat. In Mailer's scene that was the first line.

Tracy used the same thing, but it was the third line in his scene. By the time you got to that line, its power was dissipated.

NBC also liked the script. "It was just different," an NBC vice president stated. "It had a different tone." Schiller had already paid Wynn, and now had to pay Mailer \$250,000.

The question of who should get the screen credit was contested, and went to the Writers Guild for arbitration. Schiller wanted the credit to go to Mailer, which angered Wynn. "I've been writing for 10 years," he said, "and I felt my script for 'The Executioner's Song' was my best work. I can't do any better." Mailer's script, he said, "was something out of the 30s." Wynn sent the Guild a detailed analysis of the two scripts, arguing that Mailer's was derivative. Mailer had not read Wynn's script, and wrote a brief letter to the Guild that attempted to prove it. His argument was that anyone who wrote a script based on the book would have to depict the same key events and characters. He explained it this way: